

Digital Dialogism: Space, Time, and Queerness in Video Games

by

Elizabeth Brey

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Examining Committee Membership

The following served on the Examining Committee for this thesis. The decision of the Examining Committee is by majority vote.

External Examiner

Dr. Cody Mejeur

Assistant Professor, University of Buffalo

Supervisors

Dr. Gerald Voorhees

Associate Professor, University of Waterloo

Dr. Neil Randall

Associate Professor, University of Waterloo

Internal Members

Dr. Ken Hirschkop

Professor, University of Waterloo

Dr. Heather Smyth

Associate Professor, University of Waterloo

Internal-external Member

Luke Potwarka

Associate Professor, University of Waterloo

Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

Video games are multimodal pieces of media; they communicate meaning through many layers of signification including aural, visual, narrative, mechanical, and more. To understand the ways that games communicate meaning and influence interpretation, it is crucial to not just examine the various layers of game modalities, but the ways that those layers communicate with each other as multimodal objects. By adapting Mikhail Bakhtin's literary and language theory of dialogism (1981), this dissertation argues that because games are multimodal, they have layers of different "voices" that communicate ideas about the game to its players. These dialogic multimodalities "speak" different meanings to players, who then transform their interaction with these multimodalities into a narrative whole.

Joining queer theory, narrative theory, and game studies, this dissertation examines one of the most successful video game titles to date, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011), which in addition to its widespread popularity, has also been identified by white supremacist groups as a game that supports white nationalist causes. Through a dialogic analysis of the multimodalities of temporal and spatial representation within the game, this dissertation identifies narrative, genre, gameplay, and representational elements of *Skyrim* that support white nationalist play while also silencing potential anti-racist perspectives within the game.

Chapter 1, Chapter 2, and Chapter 3 work together towards a functional version of dialogism for the study of games, proving its relevance, formalizing the changes I make to the original theory, and indicating how important dialogic readings can be. Chapter 4 argues that the construction of timespace of *Skyrim* follows a chronotope of domination, where the player's use of and engagement with the game are devoted to the control of time and space. Chapter 5 examines player self-narration and embodiment in queered space, looking at how spaces communicate to players, and Chapter 6

makes the case that player use and manipulation of queered time in the game encourages players to understand and interact with *Skyrim* in particular ways. Together, these chapters suggest that the ways players are oriented to play *Skyrim*, based on its spaces and temporalities, points players towards interpretations of the game that normalize and uphold instances of white supremacy based on narrative, interactive, and mechanical means.

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My first draft: Tried to write four different dissertation topics. My second draft: Narrowed to one of those topics. My third draft: Narrowed that topic. My fourth draft: Narrowed the narrower topic. My fifth draft: Narrowed it more. My sixth draft: Eventually became this.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“Skyrim belongs to the Nords!”

I can’t even remember the first time I heard it. It’s what is called a “bark” in game voice overs, a short line of dialogue delivered by a background, non-playable character. Intended to simply fill out audio space, barks are systemic dialogues that act to perform a few helpful roles, but quite often, they’re one of those background elements intended to make a world feel more fleshed out and realistic. If a player bumps into a non-playable character (NPC), they might have a bark saying “hey, watch where you’re going” or “slow down!”

So that’s all it was supposed to be; “Skyrim belongs to the Nords!” is just a bark from the 2011 video game *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. A background noise. But like a few other barks in the game, the unusual phrase was so often triggered in the game that it became very noticeable. It can happen any time a player comes into conflict with a Nord character, the Viking-esque stereotyped race of humans within the fantasy setting—which happens quite often.

Predictably, the phrase hit the meme lexicon of gamers as the game’s popularity exploded. Frequent uses of the phrase include what is referred to as “green text” memes, where a user on 4chan.org tells a long, text-based story that surprisingly ends with the phrase “Skyrim belongs to the Nords” or some variant thereof. Other popular images include a young girl holding a baby, encouraging her to say “sister,” but the baby, Photoshopped to wear the infamous Skyrim helmet, instead shouts “Skyrim belongs to the Nords!”



(Fig 1.1, A young girl holding an infant with a horned helmet on their head with the caption, “Baby: S-s-s-s-s-s-s-s-s-s...” “Sister: Sister? Are you Trying to say sister?” “Baby: SKYRIM BELONGS TO THE NORDS” (Know Your Meme 2017).

I was never very comfortable with this meme; the bark always made me become very aware of my identity in the game, whether I was playing as an elf, human, or lizard-person. While there are a lot of Nords living in Skyrim, they certainly aren’t the only ones who live there. It felt so brazenly racist, reminding me of all the times I had heard someone “ironically” or seriously tell another person to “go back where they came from.” I came to realize it was just racist, and the memes usually attempted to disconnect the racist tones of the phrase for humorous effect.

The “Skyrim belongs to the Nords!” memes faded over time, as memes do. Yet then, in 2016, they came back. But it wasn’t just a joke about the game this time; the context it was being used in was fully political, with versions of the meme altered to have then-presidential candidate Donald Trump’s face Photoshopped onto the figure of Ulfric Stormcloak, leader of the Nord-centric army and one of the firmest believers that “Skyrim belongs to the Nords.” “Make Skyrim Great Again” appeared as a new slogan, drawing off the original meme.



(Fig 1.2) A screenshot of Ulfric Stormcloak on his throne in *Skyrim* with Donald Trump's face photoshopped onto the image. (Astrology Memes 2016)



Skyrim belongs to the true
nords

(Fig 1.3) The "Decision 2016" graphic from news outlets during the 2016 US presidential election with the images of *Skyrim* characters General Tullius and Ulfric Stormcloak imposed underneath it with the words, "Skyrim belongs to the true Nords" written below the images (Me.Me 2016).

Connecting the fictional leader with the real-world one, players were quick to note the similarities between Trump's nationalist rhetoric and the same kinds of language found in the game. The fact that it was so simple to make the connection between the racist, ethno-nationalist video game leader and a real-world candidate, and eventual president of the United States, should be shocking. I wish it was.

The game is still widely popular even ten years after release, with official sales records hitting 30 million copies sold as of 2016 (Sullentrop 2016) and only rising since. Players are more aware of the content and conventions of the game than ever. And what I thought of as an uncomfortable cultural tension in 2011 when I first played *Skyrim* has since erupted into international conversations and real-world violence. It is observable in American culture right now that white liberation fantasies are being fueled by the political environments of 2016 and onwards. When I spoke with my horrified mother during the Capitol Insurrection on January 6th, 2021, I found myself unable to share in her shock or surprise that the event was happening; I was just watching the topic of my dissertation unfold on the world's stage. Even when the New York Times correspondent Mike Leibovich commented "The Capitol seems to be under the control of a man in a Viking hat" (New York Times 2021, 3:52), I reacted with a snort. Of course.

Let me be clear: I am in no way arguing that *Skyrim* is responsible for the Capitol Insurrection. I am not trying to prove that the terrorist mentioned above played the game and decided to slap on a fur-adorned horned hat and invade the Capitol. What I am arguing is that the dialogics of the game resonate deeply with the entitlement, the self-centeredness, and the violence of white liberation fantasies, whether that fantasy is a video game or a domestic terrorist attack. As Kristian A. Bjørkelo writes:

The affordances created by the intersection of the game and of their political position, allows the game to be experienced as a White Nationalist power fantasy, potentially

strengthening their narrative and position. But as this interpretation is dependent on an existing White Nationalist framework of thought, it is still an open question of how well the game [acts to] proselytize the White Nationalist cause (2020).

I harbor no beliefs that Bethesda studios intentionally created the game to mirror white supremacist ideology, but as Gerald Voorhees puts it, games can “not help but reference their social and political milieu” (2014)—white supremacy is so embedded in American culture that pulling on what may otherwise seem an innocent few threads can culminate in a game that ultimately excuses, or even uplifts, white supremacist ideology. It is not just the structure of the game’s design that can encourage white supremacist ideologies, but the ways that *Skyrim* intersects with cultural and political forces that create this meaning.

Digital Dialogues

This example—of the bark “Skyrim is for the Nords” and white supremacist uprisings in the United States—shows a dialogical relationship in language. By dialogical, I refer to a quality of discourse where the meaning of words within that discourse is created by each word’s relationship to others in the past, present, and future (Shepherd 74). Dialogism is Bakhtin’s method of combining the form of prose’s languages with the ideologies, contexts, and tensions surrounding it. What Bakhtin calls an “utterance,” a single instance of a word or act of speech—or in this case, a video game bark—is expressed in a context of relationships and change. Each word is connected to and complicated by its history of use, as well as its ongoing social and cultural moments. Each utterance is then, as it moves from present to the past, part of a chain of discourse.

Take, for example, the social and cultural chain of discourse surrounding “Skyrim belongs to the Nords” as earlier described. In its creation, it was intended to be little more than background noise. However, it was always borrowing from political discourse, carrying the weight of a nationalist

slogan. Through its use, it became a joke removed from its racist context by a community of speakers, its nationalistic fangs blunted through use and overuse. It became a joke among players, a way that *Skyrim* players were able to poke fun at one of the idiosyncrasies of the game. Over time, *Skyrim*'s prominence in gaming discourse faltered; the next big game was released, and the focus of memes changed. But the game was still well-loved and well-played between 2011 when it was released and 2016, when the memes returned. However, now the memes were explicitly political callbacks to the game, making a comparison between a well-known fictional racist character and a real-world candidate for president. But this change was easy for players to make because the form of the bark was political in the first place—players were just now noticing the real-world politics this kind of nationalist slogan was referring to, as they were responding to the real-life nationalist movements in the United States in 2016. Now hearing the bark within the game makes me think of Donald Trump—the last person I want in my video game escapism, but my ability to use *Skyrim* as an escapist media form in the first place was always from my own privilege. Make *Skyrim* great again, indeed.

Bakhtin refers to this kind of relationship as dialogical, something that Valerij Tjupa calls “an agonal structure of a verbal communication . . . a struggle [of] two or more codes between which links of selection and connotation emerge” (2009, 124). Bakhtin writes that:

The word, directed toward its object, enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgments and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with yet a third group: and all this may crucially shape discourse, may leave a trace in all its semantic layers, may complicate its expression and influence its entire stylistic profile. (1981, 276-77).

Each utterance has its own social and rhetorical context which are related to, created through, and defined by the utterance's past and present uses. This forms a unique system of social entanglements and meanings, a form of resonance.

Here, by “resonance,” I use the term as Bonnie Ruberg does, referring to “points of relationality, moments when the structures and messages . . . echo and are echoed by the structures of queer thinking” (2019, 20). José Esteban Muñoz, too, uses “resonance” to describe the interactions of his methodology of hope and his objects of study throughout his book *Cruising Utopia* (2009). Resonance, Ruberg notes, does not require accordance, similarity, congruency, or any form of harmony. It simply means a connection, a moment where ideas, concepts, feelings, memories, and facets of life and identity are evoked (2019, 20). To resonate queerly is to feel elements of the here-and-now (to borrow from Muñoz) and how they might (to paraphrase Bakhtin) weave, merge, recoil, or intersect (1981, 276) with other elements. When elements of a video game resonate, they can connect game content with real-life experiences.

Resonating is, to me, a form of dialogic narration that expands past the spoken or written word that Bakhtin worked with; the concept of resonance allows us to expand dialogism from its constituent media form and create a back-and-forth between fictional and non-fictional socio-political life. It also inspired me to adapt the theory of dialogism for video games in the first place and consider different kinds of dialogic relationships from a new angle. The kind of dialogism seen in language, as coined by Bakhtin and the Bakhtin Circle, can be a model for us to understand the relationships between other kinds of “languages”—ones that are relational to video games and video game players specifically. Because they are discursive in terms of the various modes of communication that players access simultaneously, video games communicate ideas and messages in the ways that their modalities converse. As Voorhees notes, video games are:

. . . aural, written and visual representation [that] incite players to enact processes of signification, producing meaning not through mere mental interaction with a finished text but rather through the player’s construction of the text in the act of gameplay. (2012, 8).

This is to say that video games are constructed of multiple layers of modalities, each with its own set of signifiers that creates meaning (Toh 2019; Hawreliak 2020; Voorhees 2012). It is only through a thorough understanding of the multimodal nature of video games that scholars can begin to see how these complex digital artifacts communicate meaning to players. Not only are there discourses like visual representations (characters, environmental setting, menus) or aural (diegetic and nondiegetic sound cues), but procedural discourse (mechanics, affordances, activated elements of the game), narrative discourses (narration, narrators, plot, characters), and genre discourses (social, historical, tropes)¹. Most of these discourses are concurrent, but not always harmonious.

In taking a dialogical approach to the study of games, if we consider the modalities of video games to be utterances, or discrete units of ideas, we can understand the tensions between elements of gameplay that can contribute to the whole of a video game. Bakhtin explains that in literature:

The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads, woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of the utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. Indeed, the utterance arises out of this dialogue as a continuation of it and as a rejoinder to it—it does not approach the object from the sidelines. (1981,276-77).

To view the competing languages of video game discourse as dialogical in nature means to view each modality as a discourse which impacts others, becoming “a participant” as Bakhtin puts it, with others. This level of participation becomes important when we have cultural texts with wide ranges of messages spanning multiple modalities which impact player interpretation of the text.

¹ These are all base level discourses—there are more advanced elements of discourses. For example, one could look at Genette's narrative discourses (order, mood, voice, duration, frequency) as part of narration (1980).

Modalities can and do conflict with one another; this is well-established through the concept of ludonarrative dissonance². There are times where the music doesn't match the gameplay, or the visuals are at odds with the narrative. We can call this intermodal dialogism. However, there is another kind of dialogism present within a video game—a kind of dialogism between several modalities at the same time, or multimodal dialogism. There are tensions between different readings of the game text that span multiple modalities. The tensions between different multimodalities leads us, as players, to particular forms of interpretation that are deeply impacted by the player's experiences—both in-game and outside of it—that resonate with the player. This is to say that multimodalities become a form of Bakhtin's "living utterances," subject to the "socio-ideological consciousness" of players. The construction of a game text, a joint effort between developers and players, is impacted by the form/structure of the game as much as the player's own participation in multimodal dialogues. For example, I have no doubt that the creators of *Skyrim* did not intend for their game to be so beloved by white supremacists specifically—Bethesda Game Studios, the development studio, would logically attempt to make a game with wide appeal, which the game has as one of the most purchased games ever. But to purposefully set out to make a white nationalist game? Unlikely at this scale³. But when white supremacists can play this game and draw conclusions like "the Thalmor Elves are 'Jews with pointy ears and gay magic'" (Bjørkelo 2020) and that:

Some forum users also call out the xenophobic and prideful aspects of Nord culture, and the Stormcloaks as parallels to their own ideology. One user summarizes it easily; if the Khajit and Argonians can have their own native homeland, why can't the Nords? And why can't White Nationalists in the real world have their own nation? The user further states, with support from others, that the game could be used to open the eyes to the conditions of white people and to the need for White

² Ludonarrative dissonance, coined by game developer Clint Hocking, refers to the effect of game mechanics and narrative structures conflicting in active gameplay and the formation of the player's story (Hocking 2007).

³ Even the white supremacists do not believe it was intentionally set up to support their cause, albeit for racist, xenophobic reasons, claiming Bethesda is "owned by a Jew" and therefore it could not be intentional (Bjørkelo 2020).

Nationalism. One would have to be a “moron” not to see this, he explains. (Bjørkelo 2020).

So how are these conclusions being drawn? What is the game doing specifically that supports these beliefs? In dialogism, a framework, set by an author, acts to communicate social significance through its use of narrative elements like characters’ voice or styles of writing. In games, however, this framework by an author does not hold the same sway; what Bethesda “meant” is secondary to the ways that players are able to create their own narrative frame that alters the meaning of style. This is where multimodal dialogism, as opposed to intermodal dialogism, becomes a crucial and understudied part of game analysis. I argue that through dialogic frameworks, we can understand how different parts of the game’s system—narrative, mechanical, interactive, representational, and more—working together act to communicate specific ideological interpretations when expressed in contact, in participation, with one another. On a more specific level, I want to explore the ways that time and space are represented within a video game like *Skyrim* and how time and space can also act as the basis of dialogue.

Time and space are representational systems of experience within a video game, the complex intersections of narrative, representation, and mechanical interactivity. Part of what makes a moment of traditional dialogism such as “*Skyrim* belongs to the Nords” speak so loudly to players is that there are temporal and spatial conditions to the phrase. This is to say that *Skyrim*’s narrative spatiotemporal properties resonate dialogically both from the level of content and structure and from the perspective of a player performing gameplay. Time and space are more than the result of player interaction with the game; they are themselves multimodal structures built directly into the game with their own impact on interpretation and meanings. Examining multimodal dialogues of time and space can mean exploring the ways players are encouraged to interact with specific spaces, the impacts of temporal logics on gameplay, or how players create relationships with space.

This dissertation seeks to explore the temporal and spatial properties of a video game and how those properties function as multimodalities within that game. In doing so, I combine and adapt two of Mikhail Bakhtin's more famous theories—that of chronotope and that of dialogism (1981). I also make the argument that game narratives—at least, the player-generated narratives within the genre called “open-world role-playing games⁴”—engage in spatial and temporal structures queerly. Existing in what Jack Halberstam coins as queer time and queer space (2005), outside the heteronormative expectations or demands of that time and space, players engage in a predominantly freely navigated story world. Therefore, I approach dialogism and chronotope from a queer lens in order to analyze the multimodalities of time and space.

Through these theoretical approaches, I investigate one of the most successful titles of the last decade, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. I argue that the players of *Skyrim* form a queered dialogic relationship with spatial and temporal structures. These dialogics resonate with both social and political systems represented in the game's diegesis but also with extra-diegetic cultural dialogics, acting to sustain, critique, or reinforce systems of power. This raises a significant issue in the representation of *Skyrim's* time and space; while the game seems to promote ideologically positive philosophies of freedom, choice, and liberation, it does so by reproducing colonial narratives and attempting to complicate them. *Skyrim's* dialogics raise shallow questions about hegemonic power, but ultimately gestures towards mere sympathy for the oppressed while upholding the status quo maintenance of normative white systems. This becomes clear through the queering of the time, space, and chronotopes of *Skyrim*; the ways the player engages in spatial and temporal structures within the

⁴ "Open world" refers to a structure of video games wherein a player is allowed to access and explore the fictional, represented space within the game according to their own desires. As opposed to a more traditional, closed world structure, which constrains players to particular locations according to a more linear plot, an open world game places players in a more autonomous position within the game world. Challenges and objectives are met according to a player's individual desires within the gameplay world, rather than in a step-by-step manner.

game creates a false equivalency between systems of oppression as opposed to pointing towards a genuine critique. The kinds of play that are offered to the players allows for queer gameplay, but the queerness of the text is dominated by its structure: the very structures of the game silence its potential queer and anti-racist voices.

Chapter Outline

Following this introduction, Chapter 2 of this project seeks to unite the relevant literature that underpins this dissertation. As an interdisciplinary argument, the relevant literature consists of multiple branches of Humanities research, including Game Studies, Queer Theory, Narrative Studies, Rhetorical Theory, Media Studies, Communication Studies, and more. The work is interdisciplinary in that it connects multiple branches of knowledge, but also multidisciplinary in that my research has been supervised by scholars of multiple fields of academia, although the argument and writing are my own.

The Literature Review chapter focuses on four main areas of knowledge that inform my argument:

- 1) A contextualization of Bakhtin's literary scholarship within theory development in Europe and its settler colonies⁵;
- 2) Definitions and adaptations of traditional Bakhtinian scholarship, specifically exploring dialogism and chronotope;
- 3) The checkered history of narrative studies within Game Studies as a field;

⁵ I borrow this phrase from Kai Linke and his book, *Good White Queers: Racism and Whiteness in Queer U.S. Comics*. As he notes, "I use the expression "Europe and its settler colonies" when referring to the group of countries typically denoted as 'the West' in order to remind myself and the readers that the term 'the West' actually has a hidden colonial and racial meaning in that it usually indicates those countries were white people of European descent constitute the dominant majority" (2021, 13).

4) The intersections of Queer Theory, Narrative Theory, and Game Studies.

This is a convoluted background, but not without reason—historically, literary theory has been received negatively within Game Studies, but the particular value of dialogism is that it acknowledges and reinforces the political nature of language and communication at a structural level. Game Studies and the games industry have both long denied the political significance of structure, arguing for political neutrality in the case of the games industry and faux objectivity in the case of Game Studies (Vossen 2018). Through the literature reviewed in this chapter, I am able to lay the framework for an analysis of video games that unites both structure and content as social, political, and most importantly, accountable for its messages and meanings.

Chapter 3 explains my methodology for the study of *Skyrim*. This chapter discusses the processes that I followed to perform a queer close reading, including: the materials used for analysis; the ways I gathered information; how I evaluated the information; and finally, how I drew conclusions. Drawing my data from both video and textual discussions of the game, as well as from writing narrative accounts of my own experiences, I follow the tradition of “too-close” reading (Stang 2022; Ruberg 2019; Chang 2010) and look deeply into the fictional and factual events of gameplay. By focusing on queer play and queer failure (Halberstam 2011; Ruberg 2019), I am able to consider the ways that playing queerly can also be playing whitely and can ultimately act to support white supremacist beliefs, both casually and overtly. Working from the perspective of queer phenomenology (Ahmed 2006; Burrill 2017), I set up the framework through which I engage in the in-depth examinations of spatiotemporal “languages” and how these languages inform and create meaning through structure, content, and gameplay interactions. Exploring languages as something not necessarily textual or spoken, the aim of this project is to discover the unspoken dialogics of *Skyrim* that contribute to white supremacist interpretations.

Then, Chapter 4 brings time and space together as chronotope, or time-space. A chronotope refers to the ways that time and space act together to communicate meaning, giving shape to each other and forming a greater whole. This is especially crucial in games, where the “languages” that create meaning are built directly into the spaces and the times that players spend in those spaces. Here, I make the argument that the chronotope of *Skyrim* is not one of liberation or adventure, but rather domination. Despite the thematic focus of the game on choice and liberty, the time-space of *Skyrim* proves to silence, rather than uplift, the potential for queer resistance that is so integral to queer time and space. To demonstrate this as a spatiotemporal language, I gesture towards two unique styles of narration within the game—semi-literary narration and architectural narration. These two styles are separate forms that occasionally intersect, but they act as the primary historical narration of *Skyrim*, which is a place held down and pinned in place until accessed by the player. Through a close-reading of the narrative architectures of the fictional city of Markarth and its historical representations through in-game books, I argue that the chronotope inadvertently draws on white supremacist beliefs while silencing possible anti-racist potential within the game itself.

Next, Chapter 5 focuses on the construction and navigation of spaces within the game. Focusing on a narrative account of exploring a tomb within the game, this chapter considers how the open-world navigation of space resonates with conceptualizations of queer space. While the majority of players do not identify as queer, and while their place-making practices do not “make” the player themselves queer, the ways that players create new measurements of meaning for themselves within a space separated from heteronormative demands can be understood as queer. By connecting the place-making practices of queer space with the place-making practices of players within the wider narrative structures of *Skyrim*, I am able to illustrate the destabilization of the plotted narrative into something more individualized, personal, and queer. The emerging narration becomes dialogical in the sense that it communicates meaning to the player. However, the transformative powers of queer space are

interrupted and limited by the neomedievalist nature of the space. In borrowing from the European settler-colonial's cultural *mélange* of "Viking," *Skyrim* also pulls threads of white supremacy into its spaces. Through the constructions of neomedieval spaces, players inadvertently—or purposefully, in some cases—engage in constructions of race that repeat white supremacist myths of a superior race and their ownership of spaces not their own.

Following that, Chapter 6 examines the use and manipulation of temporal structures in *Skyrim*. In this chapter, I argue that the representation of time in the game both resonates and disharmonizes with perceptions of queer time. While temporal structures in *Skyrim* are queered in the sense that they require the player to find meaning in their identity outside of heteronormative expectations, the freedoms from expectation come without the price of oppression that real-world queer time costs, making the temporal structure a privileged queerness that reinforces white and heteronormative standards. Through the exploration of *Skyrim*'s opening cutscene and the Civil War questline, this chapter argues that the structures of time within the game act as an authorial language in two ways: firstly, through the appropriation of queer time within the fictional spaces of the game, and secondly, through the refracted nature of real-world temporalities outside of the game and their impact on gameplay. Viewing my own narration of these moments within the game from two distinct time periods, I argue that the player is oriented towards sympathy for white supremacist views early in the game, acting as a frame for the rest of the player's time in *Skyrim*. Later, in examining my own temporality as a player in the game, I explore my resistance and rejection of these views outside of the game and my inability to relay that rejection into my game experiences due to the totalizing, authoritative narration of the game.

The final chapter, Chapter 7, acts as a conclusion to the dissertation. Here, I speak towards the larger constructions of race and queerness as represented in the game, as well as explore the specific ways each chapter supports the overall argument and line of thinking. The conclusion chapter

reviews each chapter with an eye towards the formation of racial identities within *Skyrim*, finding more connections between queer play and the kind of play that white supremacists engage in than I would like to have found—both scorn the rules of a game and reject a hegemony of play; both inject their own content/themes given the opportunity; both rely on a certain freedom or willful failure to adhere to the norm. Ultimately, this dissertation identifies a resonance in white nationalist play and queer play through a queer, dialogic reading of the temporal and spatial narratives of the game.

In summary, this dissertation explores the narrative intersections of dialogical meaning and video game temporal and spatial structures. In particular, through a framework grounded in queer theory, it is possible to uncover the different kinds of dialogical structures that help create each game's story. Drawing on theories of chronotope and dialogism by Mikhail Bakhtin through the concepts of queer time and queer space, as coined by Jack Halberstam, I argue that narrative structures of time, space, and chronotope (space-time) in games create meaning through the dialogical interplay of represented content, mechanical and rule-based forms, and diegetic and non-diegetic player experience. Moreover, I want to show through dialogism that the act of queering play can also be playing whitely or playing in support of white supremacist structures—there is overlap in the ways that queer play and white play both operate and it is crucial for those playing queerly to consider their actions with an awareness of structural and content focused queer play. The beautiful thing that is queer play must be conscious of these overlaps, or it risks supporting white supremacist thinking.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The work of this dissertation draws on a multitude of threads: traditional narrative studies, Bakhtinian theories of narrative style and structure, game studies' approaches to narrative, and queer game studies. This interdisciplinary perspective sets the basis for a rich analysis, but a complex one to foreground. This literature review is broken down into four sections in order to best address the topics at hand and supply the necessary background for the upcoming chapters. That said, the first section of this literature review will begin by contextualizing Bakhtin's literary scholarship alongside the developments of literary scholarship in the Europe and its colonial-settler nations, tracing the formation of narrative studies, narratology, feminist narratology, and queer narrative studies. In the second portion of this literature review, I will also define the two large-scale theories of Bakhtin from which I draw the main theoretical apparatuses for my analysis—dialogism and chronotope. The third portion of this literature review considers the evolution of narrative studies in the field of game studies, particularly the formation of what became known as the “Ludology Versus Narratology” debate. The fourth section explores queer game studies and finally, the queerness of game stories.

Contextualizing Bakhtin

Jan Simons notes that narrative is “generally considered as the core pattern for cognition, comprehension and explanation for constructing identities and histories” (2007), and Roland Barthes states that narrative is “like life itself. . . international, transhistorical, transcultural” (1975, 237). Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller trace the beginnings of narrative studies back to the 1800s, where scholars in Europe and the United States began the task of collecting knowledge about how stories are

structured (2003, V). Borrowing from three sources—rhetoric and poetics, practical knowledge of professional writers, and literary critics’ observations—narrative studies began to centralize and organize bodies of scholarship. The majority of research at this time, according to Kindt and Müller, “indicated a degree of continuity in the basic definition of the field and the methods of description used” (2003, V). Narrative studies, then, began as a collection of methods based on observations, analysis, and structure, taking its cues from rhetoric and literary studies as well as the writing models of authors without scholarly backgrounds.

Expansions to the study of prose in the 1920s and 1930s revealed that the stylistics of drama or poetry did not account for the ways that novels actually narrate. But one popular view for the study of language and meaning was that of formal linguistics, as espoused by Saussure, which would abandon or ignore social use and meaning of language. The popularization of dialogism by Bakhtin and others is in opposition to such formal approaches to languages. Invested in the ideological implications brought into language form via class and political power, Bakhtin believes dialogism is present in all language use and extends throughout rhetorical and narrative genres. In the 1920s, Bakhtin and Voloshinov⁶ began to formulate and argue towards a less homogeneous understanding of language (Hirschkop 1989, 9). Bakhtin did not consider this task as a literary project, but instead, he believed himself to be a philosopher of language, not a literary theorist or scholar of novels (Shepherd 2009, 75), and at times, his writing is contradictory or vague. It can even exceed its own logic. Ken Hirschkop refers to this kind of “conceptual ambiguity” (1989, 6) as a “shorthand” for the wideness of dialogical theory, a kind of “transcendental principle of discourse” (1989, 6)—quite an ambitious

⁶ The Bakhtin Circle consisted of a number of scholars who worked together on the concept of dialogism. Some scholars believe that some work attributed to Voloshinov was actually written by Bakhtin. This concept was explored most fully in Clark and Holquist’s 1984 biography of Bakhtin, but it is still debatable. It is clear, however, that the members of the Bakhtin Circle, including Voloshinov, collaborated and worked together developing many of the concepts of dialogism.

project on the part of Bakhtin. But it is also during this time that Bakhtin developed a specifically literary theory—that of chronotope. Bakhtin believed that chronotope is a “formally constitutive” (1981, 84) function of the novel, as writers must create entire worlds of both space and time in their writing. Chronotope examines both how real history is represented in novels as well as fictional times, exploring “how fictional time, space, and character are constructed in relation to one another” (Vice 1997, 201). The traits of time and space and ways that spatiotemporal relationships are represented within novels can each be measured by a specific kind of chronotope, such as “meeting” or “threshold.” The idea is that each piece of literature, whether it attempts to bind itself to reality or not, has its own kind of “signature” of sorts that can help scholars classify and understand its overall theme or meaning. This theory, too, is not without its problems, however—Vice also notes that chronotope “seems omnipresent to the point of invisibility or extreme obviousness,” causing significant confusion among scholars (1997, 201). However, both these works (dialogism and chronotope) were not made available to English speakers until later.

In Europe during 1969, we see the first use of the term “narratology” to describe a particular discipline in Tzvetan Todorov’s *Grammaire du Décaméron* (Kindt and Müller 2003, V), where he defines narratology as a science “constituted by actions such as a certain discourse, called narrative, organizes them” (Todorov 1969, 10). Todorov, Barthes, and Prince, among others, would describe narratology as the formation of a grammar of sorts, a formula structured to explain how stories make meaning, heavily influenced by structural linguistics and Russian and Czech Formalism (Kindt and Müller 2003, VI). This became known as high structuralism or thematic narratology, which focuses on the formalization of action sequences within narrative—the grammar of stories that allows narrative to function, as theorized and practiced by scholars such as Propp.

However, high structuralism proved to be too constrained and limiting to a number of scholars, who began espousing what has developed into low structuralism. Also known as modal narratology, through these methods scholars examine the shape of the structure and how that structure functions in terms of narrative voice, point of view, chronology and changes to linearity, and other story-shaping structures. Gérard Genette, whose name became synonymous with narratology in literary circles well into the 1980s (Kindt and Müller 2003, VI), is a key figure in the development of modal narratology. His work *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* is well-known for reintroducing terms such as mood, voice, order, and frequency into narratological thinking. Rather than approaching narratives as a semiotic system, Genette's approach popularized rhetorical criticism of narrative, including explorations of theme, narration, and temporality—topics that high structuralism did not define as structural but as content.

In the 1960s onwards, following the same poststructuralist turn as many Humanities fields during this time, narratology expanded and diversified. A general distrust of the explanatory power of single unquestionable formulas permeated academia, resulting in a call for a non-structuralist form of narratology which became entwined with law, sociology, history, theology, and psychology (Kindt and Müller 2003, VI). Often referred to as a “narrativist turn,” narratology saw a call for an end to “descriptive abstinence” and an evolution towards contextualized orientations within other theories, such as cultural studies (VI). In 1984, Paul Ricoeur argues that modal and thematic narratologies should not be studied separately, but instead, that the two deeply impact the other. The largest split in the field occurred around the same time Ricoeur published *Time and Narrative* (perhaps not coincidentally, but not in direct response to Ricoeur, either.) Ruth Ronen describes the shift in narratology as “a paradigm change in narratological models” (1990, 817), stating this shift occurred on three levels. First, syntactic functionalism (the grammar of narrative) is replaced by narrative

semantics (the context of form), such as what we see in Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*. Second, previous ideations of creating a formula of narrative or a universal organization for narrative is replaced by dynamic and adaptable views of narrative organization, such as what we see in Ronen's *Impossible Worlds*. Third, the focus on purely formal elements (in which the referent of narrative was ignored in favor of form) is replaced by interest in the narrative referent and narrative structure together (Ronen 1990, 840-41), as what we see in Bakhtin. Ronen believes that "this shift should not be described as a punctual transition but as a dialectical development, leading from the earlier ideology of classical structuralism to the gradual domination of semantics in narrative theory" (1990, 817), wherein the structuralist roots of narratology is "replaced by a renewed interest in the referent and in the structure of the narrative universe" (1990, 841).

At the same time, running parallel to the narrativist turn is the development of what has become known as feminist narratology. In 1977, Elaine Showalter criticizes formalist studies of narrative in *A Literature of Their Own* as attempts to "evade the issue of sexual identity entirely or dismiss it as irrelevant and subjective" to "desex" narratology (Warhol and Lanser 8). Mieke Bal's 1977 *Narratology*, recognized by many feminist scholars as one of the first pushes to challenge and expand narratology, was translated into English in the mid-1980s⁷ (Warhol and Lanser 2015, 4-5). Other famous feminist interventions in response to the key works of narratology continued throughout the 1980s and 1990s: Nancy K. Miller's "Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction" counters the male-centered constructs of Genette; Teresa DeLauretis's "Desire in Narrative" takes on Freudian concepts of narrative desire; and Susan Winnett's "Coming Unstrung: Women, Men, Narrative, and the Principles of Pleasure" counters what Warhol and Lanser refer to as "the

⁷ One way Bal is recognized for her feminist narratology is through writing about the works of Marguerite Duras and Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette rather than the usual male canon, introducing women as authors worthy of narratological study.

masculine assumptions founding major theories of narrative, especially Peter Brooks' *Reading for the Plot*" (1992, 5-6). As argued by Warhol and Lanser, these texts are crucial in opening the field of narratology towards feminist readings and eventually, towards intersectional feminist readings and narrative theories. As they explain it, feminist narratology requires a "consciousness of intersectional challenges, a commitment to pluralist *bricolage*, and a comfort with messy complexities" (2015, 2). But there is resistance from both traditional narratologists who argue "culturally invested" and "category-resistant" narratology cannot be narratology, as well as gender and sexuality scholars who fairly critique the formalist and binary conceptions of narrative as espoused by thematic narratology, as well as modal narratology to a lesser degree (Warhol and Lanser 2015, 2). While the argument remains contested, I find my own interests in feminist narratology to be less focused on the "narratological" aspect and more on the "feminist," as it relates specifically to queer narratives and the study thereof.

And then at the same time as all of this, it was also in the 1980s that the works of Mikhail Bakhtin were first translated and published for English audiences. Hailed as a genius literary theorist who was artistically and critically stifled by the governments of Lenin and then Stalin, both the individual and his work sparked a large following in European colonial-settler academic spheres in the 1980s and 1990s. David Shepherd (2009) explains the appeal Bakhtin's ideas hold by pointing out that the title of the essay collection most famous for discussing and defining dialogism, *The Dialogic Imagination*, is a product purely of translation and never actually found in the original Russian writing in the first place. For the English-language reader, it "lends the dialogic a particular prominence and allure," and the anachronism between the context of the work (1930s Russia) and the context of its translation (1980s settler universities during the theory boom) makes Bakhtin's work "appear to offer an unusually sophisticated, grounded and user-friendly version of positions

associated with poststructuralism” (2009, 75). Equally known for his lively, imaginative voice as well as his tendency to circle around his main points and repeat himself, Bakhtin’s essays proved to be interesting, tedious, and intellectually challenging to work with—all of which can be pointed towards as reasons for his success in the United States and Europe in the years before his death.

The sheer amount of interest in European and colonial-settler literary studies in Bakhtin and his work was overwhelming in the 1980s and 1990s, to the point where his ideas are often seen as “overextended” in literary studies (Peeren 2008, 1); in fact, a sense of “Bakhtin fatigue” seemed palpable when his name was brought up (Peeren 2008, 5). Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was a sudden influx of information available internationally from Russian archives. This glasnost knowledge complicated and contradicted a lot of what had been understood as Bakhtin’s work, ideals, and background. Text authorship, accusations of plagiarism, a long-standing argument about whether or not Bakhtin was truly a Marxist or just covering his controversial ideas in a Communist-approved language, his level of education, the amount of censorship his works faced, translation errors—these were all disputable, malleable, and changing (Hirschkop 2001, 2-6). These discoveries may have reduced the allure of Bakhtin to European and colonial-settler audiences, but not the usefulness of the concepts such as dialogism and chronotope, which I will explain in detail in the next section.

Dialogism and Chronotope

Dialogism, as a literary and rhetorical lens, explores the meanings and interpretations of language by examining the differences in spoken or written word. While dialogism should not be understood as a single theory so much as “a shorthand” for the majority of Bakhtin’s work (Shepherd

2009, 75), the driving force of dialogism, simply enough, is that form and social context are one because “verbal discourse is a social phenomenon” and language itself is a series of discourses (Bakhtin 1981, 259). Because of this connection of form and meaning, dialogism is well-suited for the study of narrative styles and structures that interact with content. It provides a framework to discuss how the form of a story, consisting of dialogues and languages, contextually acts to impact the meaning of the story itself.

It is these languages, which Bakhtin calls “*raznorečie*,” that create a specific style of narration which impacts the ways that narrative content is understood. “*Raznorečie*” is typically translated as heteroglossia (other/different languages) (Tjupa 2009, 124). *Raznorečie* coexist with other heteroglossia based on socio-economic class, culture, education, politics, interests, communities and more, forming dialogic clusters. Sue Vice helpfully differentiates the two by noting that “dialogism describes the way languages interact, while heteroglossia describes the languages themselves” (1997, 20). So, the languages, the heteroglossia itself, are part of a larger set of dialogics. Think of heteroglossia as stars in a constellation, and the constellation as a whole as the dialogic patterns.

With this in mind, it is important to recognize that to Bakhtin, language as a general practice—not heteroglossia—is not “an abstract regulatory norm,” but rather, it is “a multitude of discourse practices that form in their totality a dynamic verbal culture belonging to the society concerned” (Tjupa 2009, 124), reaffirming that language *is* contextual, not objective. While dictionary definitions provide a common baseline for the meaning of words so people can understand each other, Bakhtin argues that unique expression of language—again, in the general sense—is contextualized within its individual use—the heteroglossic language—which is what helps to form dialogism. “We are taking language not as a system of abstract grammatical categories,” he writes in

“Discourse and the Novel,” “but rather language conceived as ideologically saturated, language as a world view, even as a concrete opinion, insuring a *maximum* of mutual understanding in all spheres of ideological life” (1981, 271; emphasis original). A crucial element of language use to Bakhtin, then, is the political and ideological layers of meaning embedded in the social use of language as opposed to its denotative meaning. Dialogic meaning does not rely on an essentialist truth but instead on context; it is agonal, oppositional, conditional. It is a perpetual continuation and development of languages that intersect and interact with one another (Bauer and McKinstry 1991, 3).

Even as dialogism has been explored in a number of contexts, one of the clearest approaches to Bakhtinian dialogism is found within literary-focused cultural studies, as Bakhtin performed sample analyses of novels to explain dialogism. “Discourse in the Novel,” the essay from which much of my own framework is drawn, explores dialogism in a narrative structure. Bakhtin refers to heteroglossia as “specific points of view on the world” (1981, 291) which are made visible through the text of a novel. These specific points of view have their own respective “objects, meanings, and values” (1981, 292). His preference for the novel does not arise out of a desire to theorize literature, but because, as Mikita Hoy writes, Bakhtin believed the novel was the “key form” of his time—which was the 1930s (1992, 765). According to Josephine Donovan, Bakhtin thought the novel to be “a somewhat anarchic, insubordinate genre,” emphasizing the ways the novels can offer “a kind of popular resistance to centralizing official establishments and unifying disciplines.” Referring to what Bakhtin calls the “zone of contact” between the texts and life beyond them, Donovan argues that novels challenge existing power structures through the ways those represented power structures are formed within novels (1991, 86). Michael Holquist refers to Bakhtin’s delineation of the novel as a “supergenre,” one that extends beyond the paperback stories we think of when we hear the word “novel” (Hoy 1992, 765). Indeed, Bakhtin’s “novel” begins with novels as we understand the genre in

terms of an extended narrative prose but casts a much wider net—Hoy defines Bakhtin’s understanding of novelization as the “interplay of heteroglottal strata at work within any given literary system in order to reveal the artificial limits and constraints of that system” (1992, 765), so nearly anything, according to Bakhtin, can be novelistic. Even a video game can be novelistic.

In narrative studies, dialogism tends to look at the interplay and tensions found in different “voices” within the novel—for example, the narrator’s voice in contention with other characters’ voices. Referencing Lubomír Doležell and Wolf Schmid, Tjupa points out narrative text consists of two elements: the voice of the narrator and the voice of the characters (2009, 125). Valentin Volosinov argues that within a novel, the characters’ text is “alien” to the narrator’s, acting as “an utterance within utterance” (qtd. in Tjupa 2009, 125). In traditional dialogism, the relationship between utterances exists between internal voices within the novel, dialogues that are structured and created by stylistic form. But when we explore multimodal dialogism in a video game, we must consider context, too, as the player is partially responsible for the creation of the game’s text.

While games require an interactive relationship between player and game, video games do not supply players with genuine agency rather than supplying players with a kind of illusion of agency. The software is limited in its possible responses and actions at all times (Stang 2019; Wysocki and Brey 2018). But the otherwise interactive nature of video games—that players are allowed to decide when to access certain parts of the experience and can choose between pre-determined options—requires players to interpret and contextualize their own experiences as a central part of the game’s story. As Sarah Stang writes:

“. . . true player agency lies not within pre-scripted videogame narratives, but in the players’ interpretations of the game text, in their engagement with fan communities, and in the exchanges that occur between fans and developers. (Stang 2019).

This deeply complicates the study of game narrative. When the player's own perceptions and interpretations become a key part of the interactive nature of a video game, we must understand the role of context within the play experience. The structure of a video game, as set up by developers and publishers, sets the stage. It is up to the player to act upon that stage in ways they see fit. This requires an expansion to not just what an utterance is within a video game, but how far dialogism reaches. While traditional dialogism ends with the diegesis, video game dialogism pushes past the boundaries of the game and into the player's everyday life. When players have the interactive ability to control some of the pacing and plotting of a video game story, the dialogue of play converses with external forces. Here is where the concept of resonance is helpful—we can connect ways of acting and thinking in real life with moments within a video game (Ruberg 2019, 20). When we understand dialogism as a resonate framework, dialogues move outside of the text itself. The creator, the content, the reader, and the context all, in Bakhtin's words, converse. There is no creator without intention, no intention without context, no context without audience, and no audience without creators; all come together without necessarily uniting, but inevitably speak to one another through the structure and content of the story itself. The dialogue between authors, audiences, cultural movements—and even memes about making *Skyrim* Great Again—becomes particularly relevant when we consider the video game as a genre of software, one with its own unique dialogisms such as interactivity or navigation.

For the purposes of this dissertation, when I refer to multimodal dialogism or video game dialogism, I refer to a relationship between multimodal objects or elements in combination with each other—the meanings and possible interpretations of the structure and significance of a cluster of modalities within a video game. In its traditional form, a dialogic analysis would consider “the quality of an instance of discourse that explicitly acknowledges that it is defined by its relationship to other

instances, both past, to which it responds, and future, whose response it anticipates” (Shepherd 2009, 74). Therefore, to paraphrase and expand David Shepherd’s definition above, when we approach multimodal dialogism or video game dialogism, we are analyzing a quality of multimodal discourse within a video game that is defined by its relationship to other modalities and the ways that those modalities communicate meaning to players.

Related to dialogism is the concept of the chronotope. A chronotope acts as a “means of measuring how, in a particular genre . . . , fictional time, space, and character are constructed in relation to one another” (Vice 1997, 200-01). While understanding that a video game’s manipulation of time and space are fundamentally different than the literary model set up by Bakhtin, the chronotope “is necessary” to the study of the spatiotemporal in games, as “chronotopes—and the ideologies they reproduce—are . . . embedded into spatiotemporal organization and gameplay experiences” (Piero 2021, 4-5). Time and space are not so cleanly separate, even when examined as distinct “languages,” as they still implicate one another and work together to create a distinct sense of place and time together. This, Bakhtin refers to as chronotope. He writes:

We will give the name chronotope (literally, "time space") to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. . . In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope (1981, 84).

This well-quoted passage is the most precise definition of chronotope that is given by Bakhtin himself. In the Glossary section of *The Dialogic Imagination*, the editor Michael Holmquist famously attempts to define chronotope as:

Literally, “space time.” A unit for analysis for studying texts according to the ratio and nature of the temporal and spatial categories represented. The distinctiveness of

this concept as opposed to most other uses of time and space in literary analysis lies in the fact that neither category is privileged; they are utterly interdependent. The chronotope is an optic for reading texts as x-rays of the forces at work in the culture system from which they spring (Bakhtin 1981, 425-26).

Bemong and Borghart note that “Bakhtin’s basic assumption is the idea that narrative texts are not only composed of a sequence of diegetic events and speech acts, but also – and perhaps even primarily – of the construction of a particular fictional world or chronotope,” (2010, 4) by which Bakhtin means “a fundamental unity, as in the human perception of everyday reality” (2010, 3). Specifically, chronotope explores the ways that "space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (Bakhtin 1981, 83). But chronotope also reproduces ideology (Piero 2021, 5), as the ways that time, plot and history are narrated to us are implicated by dominant beliefs.

Bakhtin argues that the chronotope shows literary genres as distinct in terms of their stylistic and structural representations of time and space, but those representations are historically contextual to their time of both writing and reading (Piero 2021, 8). In some measurements of chronotope, time becomes more relevant than space, and in others, space becomes emphasized over time (Vice 1997, 201), but the variations between them acts to create something that is more than just time or space on their own. From a queer perspective, we see the binary of time and/or space complicated by time-space as something more fluid, making chronotope a kind of spatiotemporal androgyny, pulling exaggerations and subtleties of time and space and mixing them together. But chronotope is, as mentioned, more than just a taxonomy of spatiotemporal qualities within different genres.

In the 1981 collection of his works referenced in this dissertation, we are told that Bakhtin originally wrote "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes towards a Historical Poetics," in the 1930s. In 1973, Bakhtin added "Concluding Remarks" to his "Forms of Time" essay.

In this addition to the essay, he gives four different levels on which a chronotope operates. As quoted in Bemong and Borghart's essay, those levels are:

- (1) they have narrative, plot-generating significance;
- (2) they have representational significance;
- (3) they "provide the basis for distinguishing generic types" [(Bakhtin 1981, 250)];
- and (4) they have semantic significance. (Bemong and Borghart 2010, 6).

Bemong and Borghart's definition of chronotropic levels here explores what a chronotope *is*, meanwhile Vice offers three uses for chronotopes:

- first, as the means by which a text represents history;
- second, as the relation between images of time and space in the [text], out of which any representation of history must be constructed;
- and third, as a way of discussing the formal properties of the text itself, its plot, narrator, and relation to other texts. (Vice 2007, 201-02).

These different use cases are then dialogically related to one another and in conversation; a chronotope can be considered a particular heteroglossia as it connects to or reacts to different chronotopes. Bakhtin scholars have noted the existence of "micro-chronotopes" and "major chronotopes" from Bakhtin's writing (see Ladin 1999; Morson and Emerson 1990; Vlasov 1995; Keunen 2000), as well as a confusing tendency to use "motif" and "chronotope" interchangeably. However, chronotopes may be named like motifs (the chronotope of adventure-time; the road; the castle; the salon; the threshold; the public square, etc.), but they function more than simply symbolically as a motif operates (Bemong and Borghart 2010, 6).

Bakhtin writes that chronotopes are the "organizing centers for fundamental narrative events. . . the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied" (1981, 250). Keunen (2001) helpfully defines them as "building blocks" and "four-dimensional mental image[s], combining the three spatial dimensions with the time structure of temporal action" (2001 421). But Piero argues that we must

decentralize the spatiotemporal structures of a text from this position of meaning-making and instead analyze chronotopes as part of a larger communicative structure:

By de-centralizing chronotope as the organizing center of *narrative* events, the reforged chronotope can then be analyzed for its ability to *communicate* diverse ideologies, histories, and content . . . [chronotope can then] speak to one another, transgress genre conventions, and . . . [involve] the player as an imaginative player-reader (Piero 2021, 15; emphasis original).

Piero looks towards "reforging" as a metaphor drawn from *World of Warcraft*, where items may be customized or have undesired traits removed or changed to better suit the needs of a player (15).

While the move to "reforge" theory might come across as antithetical to theory itself, the catch is, as stated earlier, that Bakhtin never actually defined what it means and some of his definitions contradict each other. For example, Piero's reading of chronotope can be tied to this passage of Bakhtin:

. . . Time becomes, in effect, palpable and visible; the chronotope makes narrative events concrete, makes them take on flesh, causes blood to flow in their veins. An event can be communicated, it becomes information, one can give precise data on the place and time of its occurrence. . . Thus the chronotope, functioning as the primary means for materializing time in space, emerges as a center for concretizing representation, as a force giving body to the entire novel. All the novel's abstract elements—philosophical and social generalizations, ideas, analyses of cause and effect—gravitate towards the chronotope and through it take on flesh and blood, permitting the imaging power of art to do its work. Such is the representational significance of the chronotope." (1981, 250)

By this view, the "concretization" of the chronotope allows for communication of "philosophical and social generalizations, ideas, analyses of cause and effect" (Bakhtin 1984, 250), which I interpret as ideology and belief systems. The blood that may flow through the veins of a materialized form is its social context, bringing us back to dialogism.

For my own purposes, I consider chronotope to be a Frankenstein's monster of theories and concepts above: chronotope refers to "narrative, plot-generating" (Bemong and Borghart 2010, 6)

“building blocks” (Keunen 2001, 421) through which large-scale themes and styles “communicate diverse ideologies, histories, and content” (Piero 2021, 15) by means of spatiotemporal representation. To simplify, chronotope is, at least in my dissertation, a word that describes the narrative embodiment of time and space, identified by stylistic representations that in turn, communicate the material, social, and political environment from which the narrative was created. It communicates a perspective of narrative that is impacted by content but not limited to content analysis—the structure itself of the narration is part of the narrative’s discourse.

Altogether, dialogism and chronotope offer a method of study for the video game which offers both structural analysis as well as the study and relevancy of its context of play. Expanding dialogism beyond literal dialogue or the written word requires the kind of theoretical flexibility that is so valued in queer theory—to be discussed in the upcoming Chapter 3—but also is especially important for the study of games, which are dependent on their chronotopes to create narrative meaning for players. Time-space is indeed crucial to video games, and the ways we “read” and understand the text of a video game puts the focus of narrative squarely into the territory of the chronotope, as will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

Narrative Studies in Games

Neither narrative studies nor queer narrative studies in games are entirely missing from the field of game studies. But they are constantly perceived with what has become known as the “Ludology Versus Narratology” (LvN) debate hovering in the background or even at times, the forefront. The LvN debate is something that game scholars are not exactly proud of; it has been, in my experiences, one of the only phrases that earns an audible groan at conferences. Quite simply, scholars are sick of it. In “The Assemblage of Play” in 2009, TL Taylor writes that the “debate itself

has been now unpacked, undone, and revisited” and suggests that the “thicket” that is the LvN debate “probably deserves a rest” (2009, 331). And it does—I have no desire or need to revisit this unpacked and undone debate for the purposes of arguing it any further.

However, it’s almost a shame that is the case, as game studies never really learned its lessons from it because it’s been so argued over since its inception. As someone who studies narrative, I still have to grapple with it on a regular basis due to the ways the politics and culture of the debate has shaped game studies scholarship. I still have to, on occasion, defend the fact that I study narrative in games at all—isn’t that all “done” now? Not remotely, but to some scholars, narrative in games just means a twenty-year-old debate, not a field of study. Moreover, an understanding of the context through which games have traditionally been studied in game studies as a field is important to position the kind of research I am proposing and performing; after all, the queerness of video game narrative could not be developed as a concept of consideration when the narrative-ness of video games was still under debate.

The second half of the twentieth century saw a flurry of scholarly activity focused on the affordances of hypertext. In particular, the indeterminate nature of hypertext, eventually combined with the affordances of digitality, challenged how storytelling structures have been studied. The term “hypertext” comes from Ted Nelson’s 1965 paper “Complex Information Processing: A File Structure for the Complex, the Changing, and the Indeterminate,” where Nelson argues that hypertext systems have the capacity to grow and expand endlessly if built to accept growth and change. Pointing towards Vannevar Bush’s concept of the Memex, Nelson speculates about a personal form of the information compression and retrieval system Bush imagined in his 1942 “As We May Think” (Bush 1945). Hypertext, Nelson claims, would require a Memex system that supports an Evolutionary File Structure (1965, 137) to create, connect, and assign links between items within the system in

order to index how they interconnect, refer to each other, and interrelate. In his 1992 *Hypertext*, Landow draws from Barthes' ideal of a text and defines hypertext as "text composed of blocks of words (or images) linked electronically by multiple paths, chains, or trails in an open ended, perpetually unfinished textuality described by the terms link, node, network, web, and path" (1992, 3). He goes on to declare "we must abandon conceptual systems founded upon ideas of center, margin, hierarchy, and linearity and replace them with ones of multilinearity, nodes, links, and networks" (1992, 3), a call that seems to have resonated with many game scholars later in the decade through claims that the media form renders traditional narratology nearly impossible.

But before the LvN debate, the move to study video games through narrative approaches seemed to come together, as games are easily understood as complex systems of nodes, links, and networks and simultaneously convey stories. In the late 1990s, two foundational books were published connecting digital media, digital storytelling, and video games: *Hamlet on the Holodeck* by Janet Murray, and *Cybertext* by Espen Aarseth. *Cybertext* (1997) takes a proactive and unbending stance, arguing that cybertext is not only a perspective on all forms of textuality and an expansion of the scope of literary studies, but also that approaching games as cybertexts rather than narratives is the "correct" way to study games. Murray (1998) takes another course and calls attention to the ways that digital storytelling connects with existing forms of media, noting the changes to narrative convention but also noting the powerful opportunities for digital media to construct new and improved stories. She argues that electronic media have a wealth of storytelling potential and can be used to tell stories in new, more meaningful ways due to their interactivity and the possibility of player agency within a story. So, while Aarseth calls for an entirely new approach to games and narrative, Murray urges scholars to continue deploying and refining a more defined methodological toolkit that takes into account the new affordances and constraints of video games.

However, especially early on in the development of games, the “new and improved” stories Murray envisioned were often lacking the complexities and nuances of traditional literature, prompting a long-running debate about whether games and electronic media can be narratives and whether their makers should even try to tell stories. In “The Ludic and Narrative as Dialectic About ‘What Games Do,’” the opening chapter of *The Play Versus Story Divide in Game Studies*, Matthew Wilhelm Kapell summarizes the position of the ludologists as arguing that digital games are new and the appropriate focus of study for an entirely new media format should be on its new elements—on its “cybernetic relationship[s] between a player or players and the game program” in addition to mechanics, interface, and decision trees” (2016, 2). These computational, mathematical elements put the focus on the shiny bits of technology, focusing on the allure of code and holding game rules as king. On the other hand, ludologists defined the so-called narratologists⁸ as scholars who argued that games are an extension of storytelling practices, “merely one more stage that extends back at least to Aristotle's writing on drama” (Kapell 2016, 2), drawing on storytelling theories from epics, novels, film, and more. But this tracing back, as Kapell puts it, was an offense against games and what made them unique, according to ludology. In the aforementioned *Cybertext*, Aarseth rallies against disciplinary colonialism, calling for a new field of knowledge for a new medium (1997, 18), and in “Towards Computer Game Studies,” Markku Eskelinen does not mince words when he says:

[. . .] this field is also very open to intrusions and colonisations from the already organized scholarly tribes. Resisting and beating them is the goal of our first survival game [. . .] what these emerging studies need is independence, or at least relative independence.” (Eskelinen 2006, 36).

To defend this “virgin soil” lacking defenders (Aarseth 2006, 45), a number of scholars, including Jesper Juul, Markku Eskelinen, Gonzola Frasca, and primarily led by Espen Aarseth, rallied behind a

⁸ The so-called narratologists, however, did not define themselves at all.

banner of what they understood as deprivileging narrative and cultural studies in games (Aarseth 2006, 54). Frasca supplied the term “ludology,” the study of games (1999). Games are new, mathematical, computational, argues ludology: why pollute and confuse the new field with poorly considered, and haphazardly applied theories?

To prove the haphazardness of narrative in games, in his infamous “Towards Computer Game Studies,” Eskelinen claims that games are not and cannot be narrative because of the ways that games express time compared to how novels or film express time; he argues that games require “progress” in terms of the beginning to the win condition, rather than a beginning plot to and end plot (39). This is due to the fact that ludological arguments tend to hold fast to a very particular definition of narrative. Narrative theory, at its core, centers on the concept of the telling a series of events, the crucial component being the *telling*—the specific presentation of events for the purposes of creating tone, mood, characters, themes, and more. The fastening of events to a specific narrative frame is *the raison d’etre* of the narrative mode, separating it from other rhetorical modes such as description or argumentation. Therefore, the interactive nature of gameplay, the lack of fastened events and retelling, means that games cannot be narrative—this is the logic of many ludologists. Jesper Juul’s 1999 thesis, “A Clash Between Game and Narrative,” sums up the stance when he states that “the computer game for all practicality *cannot* tell stories - the computer game is simply not a narrative medium” because games and narratives are “two separate phenomena that in many cases rule each other out” (1999, 1; emphasis original). He claims that because narrative’s meaning is derived from causal logic and inevitability, whereas games are meaningful because of the player’s immediate influence and ability to change events in the moment (1999, 1), games and stories cannot meaningfully exist together well because the player will always already know the end of a game (1999, 3). He goes as far to argue that stories are entirely irrelevant in games, since games exist

without stories whatsoever, and they are still games—the rules structure, not the narrative structure is what defines a game (1999, 3). Juul here is making a great number of claims, including adding a criterion of narrative—that they have to contain a causal logic and “inevitability” in order to be narrative (1999, 1). Returning to Esklinen’s argument, he famously declares that outside of games, people are generally good at distinguishing story and non-story situations. “If I throw a ball at you,” he says, “you don’t drop it and wait for it to start telling stories” (2003, 176). Harsh, but for all its snark, the analogy of seeking a narrative in a game by waiting for a ball to tell a story is just as illogical as it sounds—people are indeed able to at distinguish the difference between representations of situations (like a novel, a film, or a video game) and an actual situation (having an inanimate object thrown at you).

While Frasca did not intend for the term “ludology” to exclude discussions of narrative (2003 “Ludologists Love Stories, Too”), it eventually became shorthand for this particularly harsh angle of formalist game studies, described by Andreas Gregerson as “strict ludology” (2014, 161). However, many game scholars found this strictness to be unsustainable, even resulting in a number of prominent ludologists, such as Juul and Frasca, writing pieces re-examining or re-explaining their former stances to be more flexible and include fictional story elements (Juul, 2005; Frasca 2003). Jan Simons discusses the difficulty in maintaining a strict ludological stance by noting that the “rivalry between ludology and narratology is that they are siblings. Both are firmly rooted in the humanities and therefore tend to consider narratives and games primarily as fictional symbolic artefacts” (2007). As Souvik Mukherjee notes:

. . . instead of recognising the supplementary relationship of the two, both the Ludologist and the Narratologist camps choose to view ‘game’ and ‘storytelling’ as

separate and watertight categories that do not have possibilities of overlap. (2015, 91).

Because the two were not opposite ends of a spectrum, but opposite faces of a coin, the debate was ultimately nothing but tautology. Murray, in “The Last Word on Ludology v. Narratology” (2005), reminds us that:

Narratology is a category of interest to the computer game formalists. It represents the authority against which they have rebelled, the thing that must be repudiated in order for their own interpretation to have meaning. [. . .] In fact, *no one has been interested in making the argument that there is no difference between games and stories or that games are merely a subset of stories*. Those interested in both games and stories see game elements in stories and story elements in games: interpenetrating sibling categories, neither of which completely subsumes the other. The ludology v narratology argument can never be resolved because one group of people is defining both sides of it. *The “ludologists” are debating a phantom of their own creation*. (2005; emphasis added). (Murray 2005).

And although many former strict ludologists have enjoyed success in studying narrative in games, the same cannot be said for many others. The long-term effects of the debate have varied and include canonizing gatekeeping and exclusionary tactics within game studies as a whole (Vossen 2018; Voorhees 2013), but also demonizing narrative and narratology within the field. While studying stories in games is well-received, it is expected to be performed in a certain way in game studies, one that does not lean too heavily on “colonizing influences” of other fields. A paper which translates literary theory and cultural studies to games—one like this dissertation—would not be well-received within game studies discourse even five years ago. But there is much to be learned, adapted, and expanded from the history of stories and social justice that can aid in the critical analysis of game narrative.

But one notable effect of the LvN debate on the multidisciplinary field of game studies was the misrepresentation of narratology. For two decades, narratology in games has mainly been

synonymous with a debate rather than a literary and rhetorical field of study. Moreover, the debate has framed literary and narrative theory as inept, ineffective, and irrelevant to games, and has cast those who might study literary theory or narrative structure in games as an academic colonizer, an uncritical scholar, or a fool (Eskelinen 2003; Aarseth 2006; Juul 1999). It has been difficult for scholars to study the narrative of games without getting caught in the mires of the LvN debate's lingering effects.

This context surrounds and complicates my research as a scholar who studies game story structure. I am not here to argue that literary theory and narratology can or should be applied to the study of video games. That is a given, as it has been done and continues to be done. I would like, instead, to consider a particular narrative theory's applicability and fruitfulness to the study of video game stories; the research gaps surrounding games and narrative have left unanswered a number of questions surrounding possible methods and frameworks that are helpful to study the structure of game narrative. Games are not novels or plays or any other form of storytelling. There are many applications of narratology that do not function for multiple genres or media. But narratology need not be limited to a small subsection of a large field. As early in the debate as 2001, Marie-Laure Ryan argues that:

The inability of literary narratology to account for the experience of games does not mean that we should throw away the concept of narrative in ludology; it rather means that we need to expand the catalog of narrative modalities beyond the diegetic and the dramatic, by adding a phenomenological category tailor-made for games. (Ryan 2001).

Along those lines, this is the kind of work this dissertation hopes to do, although my own work is not purely phenomenological.

By considering games to be both queer and dialogic, I am better able to understand the ways that games uncover, subvert, challenge, and yield to both structural form and social context, which are

entwined and interconnected. Additionally, since dialogism does not focus on the placement of narratological objects into a particular universalizing format, it instead allows us to see the pieces where they lay, so to speak, and see what shape they take without rearranging them into a restrictive structure. Dialogism puts the focus on both the individual pieces of narrative as well as the spaces in between them as the main force in creating narrative meaning. This permits us the opportunity to view video game stories differently; to view ideological power as part of structural form and narrative as a web of context, content, and play.

Queering Game Stories

I consider this dissertation to be a work of Queer Game Studies and Queer Narrative Studies. When I refer to this kind of work, I do not mean studying the representation of characters within the game⁹. While studies of representation are crucial, it is not my intention to focus on such areas within this dissertation. Representation in games is an important area of study in games, and I owe much of my knowledge on games, gender, and sexuality to work on representation. In *Gaming at the Edge*, Adrienne Shaw argues representation is often compressed down to a numbers game, but genuine representation is much more complex than simply tallying the number of women or queer or PoC protagonists in games (Shaw 2015, 16; Ruberg 2019, 16). Additionally, Shaw points out that there is a lack of intersectional approaches to game representation when considering the majority of game studies scholarship focused on gender, race, and sexuality in games (2015, 15). My own analysis does involve discussions of representation, as they are part of a complex part of the dialogical structure in

⁹ The immediate approach to studying queerness in games—or women in games, or race in games, or many markers of identity—would be to consider the ways that those identities are represented in the game itself. How many queer people are in the game? How are they represented, visually and mechanically? Are they villains? Campy stereotypes? Killed off immediately to move the plot along?

game narratives. But my own research is deeply inspired by the argument Bonnie Ruberg makes in *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, building on Shaw's crucial scholarship in representation.

Ruberg claims that identifying or relating to a game is rarely simply about feeling connected with or represented by a queer character in the game (2019, 16). As queer folks, we have always been forced to find ourselves in different ways than straight-forward (ha!) representation. *Skyrim* does offer queer character representation. But that alone does not make a game—or any media for that matter—queer. Instead, I turn to queer theorists such as Judith Butler, José Esteban Muñoz, Sara Ahmed, Lee Edelman, and Kathryn Bond Stockton to explore queerness, as well as how queer theory shifts within a game, as explored by queer game scholars such as Ruberg, Shaw, Chess, and many others. Queerness is not only a lens, but a kind of epistemology, a way of designing, playing, interpreting, and knowing a game.

In *Queer Theory: An Introduction*, Annamarie Jagose suggests that queerness is the “post-structuralist figuring of identity as a constellation of multiple and unstable positions” (1), that it is “calling into question conventional understandings of sexual identity by deconstructing the categories, oppositions and equations that sustain them” (Jagose 2010, 97). Queerness is “always ambiguous, always relational” (Jagose 2010, 96), but it is crucial to understand that this flexibility and ambiguity is not because definitions are contested by scholars, activists, and queer folks (even though they are). More precisely, this flexibility and elasticity is what queerness *is*, to a large degree. José Esteban Muñoz explains that:

Holding queerness in a sort of ontologically humble state, under a conceptual grid in which we do not claim to always already know queerness in the world, potentially staves off the ossifying effects of neoliberal ideology and the degradation of politics brought about by representations of queerness in contemporary popular culture” (2009, 22).

The resistance towards rigid definitions, of theories that would bind and limit the ability of queerness to resonate with the multitudinous ways that queer folks actually experience their lives, is emblematic of queerness itself. To think about the world queerly is to challenge and resist the heteronormative structuring of society, the ways in which heteronormative sexuality assumes a position of power. As explained by bell hooks:

. . . queer not as being about who you're having sex with (that can be a dimension of it); but queer as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it and has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live. (hooks 2014).

Along those lines, Jack Halberstam argues that we can think of being queer as a sexual identity, but we can also think of queerness as “an outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules, and eccentric economic practices” (2005, 1). Drawing on Foucault, Halberstam defines queerness as “nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time” (2005, 5), most particularly, “the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of a family, inheritance, and child rearing” (2005, 2), which he and many others connect to heteronormative power. Heteronormative expectations of success, time, space, and feeling are deeply influential ways of thinking about and understanding the world (Warner 1993). Societal measures of progress, from the individual level of “go to college, get married, buy a house, have kids” to the wider “grand narrative of progress” and its technological determinism and reproductive futurism, are heteronormative. Queer negativity, as explored by Lee Edelman in *No Future*, would place queerness as incapable of participation in this narrative and its promised future. To Edelman, queerness rejects heteronormative narratives (2004). On the other hand, José Esteban Muñoz argues that queerness opens the path towards a different kind of promised future as a “rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world” (2009, 1). Rejection is a clear element of both these understandings of queer futurism, but where Edelman’s rejection of a of

heteronormative future is focused on queerness closing the door to normative progress, Muñoz's futurism rejects heteronormative time because queerness opens a new door to alternative, radical futures.

There are a number of ways to consider queerness, queer theory, and the act of queering a methodology, theory, or text. Narratology and structural analysis are rigid and rule-based, and queer theory is infamously resistant to exactly those things. However, a queer narratology explores the representations of normative values within the construction of a text and seeks to identify, connect, and explore the ways normativity is, to borrow from Jack Halberstam, "sustained and opposed" (2005, 4) within a text. In the case of a video game text, the visual, aural, tactile, and activated/interactive elements of the game's design and mechanics, are all structures that can and do resist, reproduce, and recognize normative time and space.

Following Halberstam, hooks, and Muñoz's leads, I find that game narrative and the study of game narrative have been deeply hampered by heteronormative understandings of time, space, and linearity. As Judith Roof explains in *Come as You Are*, contemporary European and colonial-settler narrative structure:

. . . appears, thus, to reproduce natural experience, but the logic of its "representation" is shaped by those who craft it . . . Narrative's apparent rendition of life experience, then, is already an ideological version of (re)production produced by the figurative cooperation of a naturalized capitalism and heterosexuality (1996, xvii).

While not all narratives follow life experience, such as myths, religious narratives, and folktales, Roof argues that modern narrative structures predominantly follow in the tradition of representing human experience—no matter how fantastical that experience may be. The assumption that games follow in normative patterns significantly complicates the study of narrative; expecting or attempting to wrangle the queerness of game narrative into the rhythms of normative organization, logic, and

representation is bound to fail. Through viewing game narratives as queer in their construction and structure, it is possible to step away from the LvN debate and study how games narrate their meanings.

There are multitudes of theories and methods of modal narratology, but I find dialogism to yield particularly fruitful findings for the study of game narrative. Dialogism's connection of form and context, radical within the twentieth-century Russian Formalist circles of critique, is common practice within a number of fields in the twenty-first century; the paradigm of queer game studies focuses on such connections. Noting a shift in game studies towards more openly political scholarship and activism, Bonnie Ruberg argues that queer game studies is one of the major points of friction encouraging this change (2019, 6-7). Drawing on Fron, Fullteron, et al.'s concept of the hegemony of play, Ruberg writes that:

To be queer, by this definition, is to resist the hegemonic logics that dictate what it means to be an acceptable, valued, heteronormative (or homonormative) subject. Queerness challenges dominant beliefs about pleasure and power. It names a longing to 'live life otherwise.' (2019, 7)¹⁰.

This spirit of "reimagining, resisting, and remaking" (2019, 7) the ways we understand video games aligns strongly with Bakhtin's concepts of dialogic interplay and the shifts and changes to structure and form as the contexts surrounding them are impacted by power outside those forms. Dialogism's contextual focus and exploration of styles of different languages invites us to question identity, marginalization, conceptualizations and dynamics of power and agency within diegetic and extra-diegetic forms. When video games are approached dialogically, we have the opportunity to challenge the hegemony of play, resisting, subverting, reacting and pushing against constructions and

¹⁰ This kind of queerness is not the same as queer lived experiences. There exists queerness as a lived experience (which is the kind of queerness you represent through characters), but conceptual queerness has very little to do with LGBTQA representation itself.

representations of power. If we want to understand the narratives of games, we must look beyond the meanings and forms at their surface level and examine the tensions between pieces of that form. When we approach games dialogically, we can better examine who or what is given power and voice, as well as who and what are silenced, marginalized, or rendered invisible.

While any form of media can be understood queerly, the reclaiming of spaces or texts that appear to be heteronormative is crucial to subvert the numbers game of “LGBTQA representation” in video games; representation of queerness goes far beyond stating a character’s non-normative sexuality (Ruberg 2019, 16-17). My interest in dialogism as a frame for my research is both an act of recognition of the innate (but largely accidental) intersectionality of Bakhtinian dialogism¹¹ and queerness, as well as a reclaiming of the relationships between sexualities, power, and language in games. In the introduction to their anthology *Feminism, Bakhtin, and the Dialogic*, Dale M. Bauer and Susan Jaret McKinstry explain that Bakhtinian dialogism acts as a starting point that allows us to identify and distinguish patriarchal power and points of resistance when they come into conflict (1991, 3). They argue that through dialogism, feminists are able to:

. . . recogniz[e] power and discourse as indivisible, monologism as a model of ideological dominance, and narrative as inherently multivocal, as a form of cultural resistance that celebrates the dialogic voice that speaks with many tongues, which incorporates multiple voices of the cultural web" (1991, 3-4).

¹¹ I harbor no illusions Bakhtin or Voloshinov intended dialogism to be queered; their focus was entirely on socioeconomic class and power, with gender possibly being a factor in dialogic analysis an afterthought. However, dialogism intrinsically leaves the door open for other forms of identity to come through. As Nancy Glazener writes in "Dialogic subversion: Bakhtin, the novel, and Gertrude Stein" "he wrote mainly about canonical male authors, flirted with auteur theories of literary creation, and was conspicuously silent about feminism and the social effects of gender difference" (155 in Bakhtin and Cultural Theory second edition)

In a culture where anyone and everything is straight until proven otherwise, dialogism “produces occasions for the disruption and critique of dominant oppressive ideologies” as well as helps to reveal dominant discourses where we otherwise did not notice them (Bauer and McKinstry 1991, 4).

Through the conflicts within the web of dialogism, the uncovering, subversion, and resistance of normative structures acts as the foundation of cultural change and activism—something deeply needed within games culture and development particularly. As Shira Chess notes, “queerness loosens the structural grip forcing narrative to move in a singular, inevitable direction” (2015, 89), which deeply suits a dialogical exploration of game narrative. Rather than emphasizing the ending of a story or its adherence to a structural cycle, queering dialogism puts the focus on the points of friction within and in between dialogues.

However, game narratives have not traditionally been read as dialogic or queer, and especially were not understood as either during the LvN debate. As Chess notes in “The Queer Case of Video Games: Orgasms, Heteronormativity, and Video Game Narrative,” the traditional methods of studying narrative are so bound to heterosexist academic discourse that “it fails to convey the possibilities of the gaming texts” (2016, 84). Game Studies’ earliest and most notorious debate is a result of attempts to wrangle the queerness of games into normative, cis-heterosexist academic narrative forms. A number of arguments exist suggesting traditional narrative structure is heteronormative in nature due to the future-oriented drive of narrative structures (Miller 1992; Roof 1996; Halberstam 2005; Morrison 2001), and psychoanalytic analysis of narrative structure and theory itself reveals the heterocentric and often deeply masculinist desire as conflated and intertwined with heterosexual reproductive drives (Farwell 1996; Edelman 2004; Gallop 1982). In particular, the focus of traditional plotting models, such as the traditional Freytag pyramid, is dependent on a narrative desire to come to a pleasurable end, but without death or completion more broadly, as

discussed by Brooks (1984) and critiqued by Winnett (1990). On the other hand, video games offer a very different kind of narrative structure, one that works against the traditional heteronormative narrative structures as seen in many other media forms.

In *Come as You Are*, Judith Roof defines narrative as an “intersection of language, psychology, and ideology” (1996, xvi), that ideology being heteronormative in nature. She points towards narrative structure as imitating heteronormative structures of life—birth, growth¹², reproduction, and death (1996, 7)—that seeks to unite meaninglessness into meaningfulness by some stopping point or another. As birth and death are part of the queer journeys through life as well, the emphasis in the heteronormative structure of life is “reproduction,” a look towards a future beyond death. Common discourse surrounding narrative and writing often link the creation of narrative as surpassing death, a form of themselves that will live beyond their own lifespan (Roof 1996). Reproduction and children are also spoken of in the same way in heteronormative structures. Edelman famously argues that queerness has no future due to the symbolic figure of The Child, the heterosexual “obligatory token of Futurity” (2004, 12). A queer narrative is not focused on a linear passage of narration nor the coming to an end. As Roof explains, “Our very idea of an end is dependent upon a concept of chronological, linear, unidirectional time that positions the end as the cumulative locus” of completion—whether that completion is sexual, narrative, or something else entirely (1996).

Chess agrees with Roof, especially noting a large amount of pleasure is focused on the ending of a story (2015). We can note the general, wide-spread belief that knowing the ending before experiencing it firsthand will ruin or spoil a story. But video games are often played in a way to put

¹² "Growth" in queer lives often does not resemble growth according to heterosexual norms, as it is interrupted by the queer resistance to heterosexual norms.

off the ending as long as possible in order to seek additional pleasure. While endings are desired, they are often actively fought against, too. Many players will seek every last pleasurable moment of a game and then seek it again in moments of replay. It is common to play a game by first deciding or discovering what the “intended” pathway of gameplay is and then doing as much as possible to avoid it until the player is certain that every ounce of experience, of pleasure, has been explored. Story-wise, Chess refers to this as “narrative teasing” and connects it to queer sexuality. She writes:

If we think about games not as a narrative en route to a singular reproductive climax—if we focus on the process of narrative, rather than a singular heightened point of pleasure— then we find [. . .]The pleasure of gaming isn’t in a singular moment, but in the anticipation and release of many singular moments, perhaps even moments that do not infer the productivity of reproduction. The pleasure of video game narrative is about becoming, rather than about coming. There is rarely a final reproductive “cum shot” to video games. (2015, 88).

Games do not function as a pathway to completion in many cases, especially in open-world and quest or mission centered gameplay where there is no end to the game—only an end to player interest or desire to continue forward. Individual missions or quests are not narratively satisfying as an end point to the wider game. Chess explains that “the pleasure is not in reproductive completion, but in the process of play” (2015, 90), in the pleasures of repetition. If players are seeking alternative forms of pleasure in games other than the one final ending, they are playing game narratives queerly—whether they recognize it or not. Disrupting heteronormative expectations of pleasure, meaningfulness, and experience are all queer ways of understanding the world (Ruberg 2019, 15). But queer narratives are not the traditional fodder of narratology; psychoanalytic, Aristotelian, tropological, cognitivist, historical, sociological, and even some feminist narrative structures are often heteronormative, in example.

Chess’s argument that “All video games play with queer pleasure” (2015, 84) and that games’ “narrative form is unrecognizable because they are fundamentally queer narratives” (2015, 84) is a

guiding principle to my own research, as well as my decision to approach Bakhtinian dialogism as a framework for understanding game narrative. Dialogism does not focus on the structure of traditional narratives, as espoused by the European and colonial-settler structuralist thinking found in Freytag's Pyramid or even Campbell's Hero's Journey, but instead focuses on the tensions of styles of narration as a primary generator for meaning-effect. By considering game narrative as both fundamentally queer and dialogic, we are able to avoid focusing too much on the ending of the story—the climax, in terms of Freytag (Chess 2015, 85)—and instead examine the moments of delay as the point of narrative pleasure in games.

Conclusions on Literature

The role of narrative in forming both queer subjectivity and heteronormative structures is widely acknowledged in queer theory (Barthes 1974; Sedgwick 1990; Butler 1990; Edelman 2004). However, it is in exactly that fact of narrative's role in structure that makes it so crucial for feminist and queer intervention. Queering narratology means working to identify and demystify the ways that narrative creates, enforces, and interprets queer experience on social, cultural, and individual levels, and then “through narrative, . . . expose the dominant stories keeping the binaries in place” (Warhol and Lanser 2015, 7-8). However, I would not call the resulting field of study “queer narratology” but instead “queer narrative studies” or even “narrative queer studies.” Although often used interchangeably (Warhol and Lanser 2015, 9), I find the specific term “narratology” to carry with it a series of expectations which I do not find fruitful to negotiate. That is to say, I will not negotiate the queerness of narrative or the narrativity of queerness with either the specific movement of literary theory (high structuralism, to be precise) nor with the associations that the word “narratology” carries in game studies, as discussed in this chapter. What I do find to be fruitful is the queering of

chronotope and dialogism. With the Bakhtinian gold-rush tapering off to a trickle—as many of his concepts never entirely lost their allure—the application of Bakhtin to “the next big thing” of video games seemingly falls into a long tradition of “Bakhtin and . . .” style scholarship, where Bakhtinian concepts are applied to another dialogic system. Yet I do not apply Bakhtin’s work without reason.

Bakhtin believed that the novel was the most dialogic medium, but in the time since the translation of “Discourse in the Novel” entered European and its colonial-settler academic circles, dialogism has been a wide variety of applications. Hoy’s “Bakhtin and Popular Culture” approaches a number of non-literary texts, including magazines, popular music, advertisements, comic strips and more, but she also analyzes items without traditional text—comedy, art, fashion, politics, and other forms of expression typically unassociated with text. In fact, she argues it is “not only possible, but critically essential” to interrogate forms of culture beyond the novel in this manner (1992, 765). In particular, his theories of dialogism and chronotope are of particular importance to this dissertation, as these lenses’ ability to engage with cultural studies is simultaneously focused on form and content, on style and structure. Guided by queer theories of time, space, and play, I am able to explore the structure of narrative temporality, spatiality, and chronotope in video games. Rather than basing the narrative model of video games on traditionally narratological or heteronormative models, my queer lens focuses on the ways that normative power, the hegemonic forces of play, and the experiences of players within game stories converse, conflict, and create tension by existing in the same times, spaces, and timespaces. As David D. Ruffolo states, “Bakhtinian dialogism creates the important spaces to see bodies and culture not as binaries but as dialogic relations that are negotiated in highly contextualized moments” (2009, 61). What this means for studying a game narrative is that the structure of the game is not separate from its creators, its players, or its cultural and political context, but instead, all these elements intersect, interact, and weave together the bodies and systems of

players and games into a contextual moment of meaning, of resonance. Bakhtin warns against purely structural analysis of cultural works when he writes that:

Discourse lives, as it were, beyond itself, in a living impulse toward the object; if we detach ourselves completely from this impulse all we have left is the naked corpse of the word, from which we can learn nothing at all about the social situation or the fate of a given word in life. *To study the word as such, ignoring the impulse that reaches out beyond it, is just as senseless as to study psychological experiences outside the context of that real life toward which it was directed and by which it is determined* (1981, 292 emphasis original)

The “naked corpse of the word,” its form without context or meaning, certainly exists, but as he colorfully describes it, it is a dead, senseless thing from which we can learn nothing. But I disagree. I understand “the word without context” as a ghost, summoned to undeath through its own political context, rife with cultural and socio-economic meaning. We must question: what forces killed it? What sapped away its strength? To whom and why is it “dead”? Rather than considering these words, these languages, as either dead or alive as per Bakhtin’s analogy, we must explode these binaries, to raise the “naked corpse of the word” from the dead and bring forth a richer understanding of the life, death, and afterlife of a language and its dialogues.

This is of particular value in video games, where time and time again, development studios insist their games are “not political” even as they address large-scale constructs of power in society. This denial comes from the desires of the audience of game players seeking—consciously or unconsciously—to reinforce what Janine Fron, Tracy Fullerton, Jacquelyn Ford Morie, and Celia Pearce call the hegemony of play, “a complex layering of technological, commercial and cultural power structures have dominated the development of the digital game industry over the past 35 years, creating an entrenched status quo which ignores the needs and desires of ‘minority’ players” (Fron, Fullerton, et al. 2007, 309). These ghosts of languages appear in many ways and at many levels. As an example case, at the time of writing, there are a number of games which have been released over recent years have been overwhelming politically-charged in their rhetoric and messages (Campbell 2018), but those clear instances of patriarchal politics are understood by large-scale gaming culture as “not political,” as they lift up heteronormative, white supremacist, patriarchal norms while they

appropriate political struggle and real-world turmoil for minoritized and oppressed identities.

Queering the chronotope and dialogism allows us to reinvest in the political and social meaning of games and look deeper into how the styles and structures of games carry ideology, normalizing those views and reinforcing the hegemony of play.

Chapter 3: Methods

Introduction

Having foregrounded the theoretical construction of my argument, I next discuss my methodology, text selection process, and my own positionality within game scholarship for this dissertation. My objectives are to understand the narratives of *Skyrim* via dialogics of time and space. A notable and crucial element to my use of dialogism as a theory is that I do not consider dialogism as a matter of purely verbal discourse. Exploring languages as something not necessarily text-based or spoken words, the aim of this project is to discover the unspoken dialogics of *Skyrim* that contribute to white supremacist interpretations. I am seeking to understand the structure of the non-traditional dialogues that silence anti-racist messages and uplift white supremacist ideology. In examining the ways that time and space “speak” to the player, I find that the ways that an open-world game like *Skyrim* can narrate content that unintentionally or intentionally reinforces a chronotope of domination throughout the game. In the same ways that languages speak to readers through literal dialogue, video games speak to players through multimodal tensions and harmonies that create a kind of analogous dialogue, through which we can look at how meanings and ideology act to influence other modalities.

The first part of this chapter will consider the materials used for the purpose of analysis. In this case, it refers to the material and immaterial ways I accessed the particular gaming content that I discuss. For a narrative study, I opted to write narrative accounts of my play experiences to the best of my knowledge based on my own journaling and memory, as well as consider the experiences of others via textual representations of their experiences in the form of discussion boards and wikis. Next, I explore the ways in which I gathered information. Focusing on queer play and queer failure (Ruberg 2019; Halberstam 2011), this section also looks at the ways that I engage with the material, as a video game text is incomplete without the component of play. I then describe the protocols of my

research, including the kinds of details and information that I collected for the purposes of this dissertation. This considers the ways the I play queerly and the ways I categorize my own methods of queer play, notably through what I coin as emotional play, narrative play, and rules play. Next, I explain how I approached my analysis and the kinds of evaluations I made based on the criterion described in the previous section. This focuses on how I define, perceive, and work with concepts of whiteness and white supremacy for the purposes of this study, focusing on definitions of whiteness (Belew and Gutiérrez 2021; Linke 2021; Dyer 2005), but also exploring how we are oriented to particular kinds of thinking through queer phenomenology (Ahmed 2006; Burrill 2017). Lastly, I account for the ways information was analyzed, viewing my scholarship as continuing the tradition of “too close” reading as a queer lens (Miller 1992; Chang 2010; Ruberg 2019).

Authoring my Story

I am basing my analyses within this dissertation from my own play experiences taking place between 2012 and 2022. Bethesda’s 2011 *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim (Skyrim)* was in development for four dedicated years, featuring an open-world non-linear narrative, where the spatial design and environment focuses the narrative. I play the game on the PC through the Valve Software distribution platform, Steam. Steam offers a wide range of mods¹³, but I did not download and install any mods until my third replay of the game in early 2013. For the sake of simplicity, I do not consider modded materials as part of my analysis. Instead, I focus on the main game itself along with its three official expansion packs—*Dawnguard* (2012), *Hearthstone* (2012), and *Dragonborn* (2013). As one of the first and most successful open-world RPGs released in America, the game is well-known among self-

¹³ Short for “modified,” referring to content packages made by players and uploaded for free use by other players within the game; mods change, add, or remove elements of game content

identified gamers and is still popular more than ten years later after release, making it a cornerstone game for many players between the years 2011 and the time of writing, 2022. Its gameplay, plot, and messages are well-known among players worldwide.

But I won't be dishonest; I also selected this game because I love it.

I have played *Skyrim* for about 700 hours on record over the years. This estimation is according to the counter on the software distribution launcher that I play *Skyrim* through, Steam. This counter only notes the times I have been "active" on the platform, meaning the number of hours which I played in "offline" or "invisible" modes were not counted. So, 700 hours is a conservative estimate of my time in *Skyrim*, as in 2011-2013 I would often play in "invisible" mode to avoid socializing with friends, to hide that I had in fact stayed home and played videogames, or because I felt ashamed of the number of hours getting bigger and bigger. A rough estimate would put my time at over 1,000 hours; a paper I wrote in my Master's about *Skyrim* estimated I was spending approximately 50 hours a week in the game. I was also not yet medicated for my mental illness or ADHD at this time and was being harassed by a cohort member. I preferred *Skyrim* over all these things.

Some of the hours with these games were played for pleasure, others played with the express intent of analyzing and studying the game. But, regardless of if I am playing "critically" or "uncritically," it is important to understand I am playing these games queerly. In *Video Games Have Always Been Queer*, Bonnie Ruberg argues that the structure of games is queer, as discussed earlier, but also that it is crucial to play games without traditional LGBTQ content queerly. They explain that playing queerly means:

. . . both discovering the queerness in games and bringing the queerness to games are experiments in bringing the queer body—its desires, its loss, its expression of self—to press up against a game, to see where the two attract and where they repel, to form

an intimate, erotic, and sometimes subversive connection between the experiences of queerness, the beauties and dangers of LGBTQ lives, and the medium of video games [. . .] [it is] a mode of self-expression, a mode of taking pleasure, and a mode of resistance that opens itself to all players—but which belongs, first and foremost, to those who live the joys and pains and their queer lives each day in the world beyond games as well as within them (19).

While *Skyrim* contains some queer representation (see discussion of queer time in Chapter 6), the kind of queerness I find in them has nothing to do with the presence of queer characters in the game. It has to do with the ways I engage in the game and the ways the games create meaning to me as a player.

To accomplish my research goals and aims, I make findings from my own close readings of texts through interdisciplinary critical analysis rooted in narrative studies, queer theory, intersectional feminism, media studies, and cultural studies. However, due to the social and rhetorical contexts of games and game stories, I also draw on the experiences of other players via their shared experiences on public game forums and wikis such as: [reddit.com/r/skyrim](https://www.reddit.com/r/skyrim) (Reddit.com’s *Skyrim* forum); uesp.net (Unofficial Elder Scrolls Pages); or elderscrolls.fandom.com (The Elder Scrolls Wiki¹⁴). As the experiential elements of games constitute the majority of play, it is crucial that I describe the narrative elements with which I interact. I cannot share the experience directly, not even if I were to record my gameplay. There are far too many temporal, material, and contextual limitations. But, in describing my experiences narratively, I craft a textual foundation for my studies. Each chapter contains some first-person narration of my own play experiences, previously recorded in journals and papers, or written reflectively for the purpose of this dissertation. Drawing on ten-year-old memories is not the most stable form of reflection, but I also have the advantage of refreshing my memory via a

¹⁴ It is important to note that all of these are fan-based and fan-focused collectives of information and experiences without official moderation from Bethesda. Both Wikis and many discussion forums on Reddit have sources cited from official blogs, concept art, game materials, and developer interviews to support their claims.

limited collection of my own recorded gameplay from 2012-2014. Although there is no voiceover in these videos, I am able to see what actions I took, what I focused on, what I struggled with, and what I seemed to enjoy.

I also spent about 78 hours to replay the game again in 2020 while writing the dissertation itself, playing through areas and questlines of interest to my objectives, such as the Stormcloak Civil War quests, the main questline, and The Forsworn Conspiracy questline. I also did a lot of wandering to simply be in the spaces and observe areas and their rhythms, patterns, and flow. Seeing how spaces change over the course of a day/night cycle in the game allowed me to better understand the queerness of spaces and time within the game.

My initial experience of playing *Skyrim* was for entertainment, though my uncritical play mode is deeply queer, even before I had the name to categorize my experiences—I often play to elicit the largest emotional reaction from myself, painfully or pleasurably, making choices and engaging with characters, settings, and situations that may or may not make sense within the context to others. Ruberg calls this “playing to hurt” (2019, 17) and I will often judge my play experiences overall by the amount of affect—positive or negative—that I can create in play.

But I also play games over-emotionally and will often replay situations if I find a particular choice to be engaging, even if it is not effective or pleasing. However, “affectively pleasing” to me does not always mean making a choice that makes me feel happy, satisfied, or successful; I am thinking of an instance where I went back to a previous save file, losing four hours of gameplay, because I emotionally could not sit with a decision that I had made to placate an oppressive force in the game’s story rather than resist it. As a result of going back in the game, the rest of my game was more difficult, my companions angry and sad, and I was locked out of some of the content of the game due to that decision. It was a very good choice.

This kind of purposeful rejection of normative standards is associated with queer failure, coined by Jack Halberstam in *The Queer Art of Failure*, in which he argues that success is inextricable from the normative, so failure makes room for the non-normative. Halberstam notes that:

We can also recognize failure as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique. As a practice, failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities. (2011, 88).

In “failing” to play the game “right” way, I am playing queerly. This kind of queer play is accessible to any player, regardless of their sexuality; it focuses on failing—deliberately failing—to perform as expected or required to meet the expectation of progression. In games, especially open-world games like *Skyrim*, the stage for queer play could not be set better; the normative expectations, dictated by main quest lines and progression, is effectively hushed by the sheer openness of space and the ability to spend time in the ways that players choose. I spent the first five or so hours of *Skyrim* confused by this openness and the sheer possibilities of the space. I distinctly remember how in my first playthrough, I was actually cowed by the lack of instruction.

I made my character, Nyx¹⁵, after a long cutscene and harrowing escape from a tutorial village. Nyx became, as I made choices in the character creation menu, a female (like me) wood elf (entirely fictional) with mid-toned skin (unlike my own), red hair (unlike my own), and brown eyes (like my own). I didn’t know what a “wood elf” was or what it would mean moving forward—I just liked the look. Nyx’s experiences, narrated in italics throughout my dissertation, are my own reflections and memories of playing for the first time.

¹⁵ “Nyx” as a name was a standard naming practice for my own gameplay characters in many video games—it was my go-to name because I enjoy the mythology of the name as well as its suitability for many different fantasy settings. If there’s magic in a fictional fantasy world, someone called “Nyx” felt suited to it. My name in game settings has changed over the years, but Nyx was the name I gave to my first *Skyrim* character.

It was fairly straightforward, getting from the awful tutorial village to this nice little town. Riverwood, it's called. I dawdle around, trying to see what I need to do next. My previous experiences with adventure RPGs like this tell me that I need to scour the town, pick up all the available quests, and figure out how to accomplish them in an effective manner before leaving and going to the next location. So, I look around. But things aren't behaving like I expect. I expect to be greeted and told something like, "oh, can you go get X for me?" or "I'll give you gold if you go defeat X monster." I expect a symbol over the heads of NPCs telling me that they have a task for me. But none of them do; I can't tell at a glance if anyone has a quest for me at all. So, I talk to everyone I meet.

I meddle in a local love triangle, I learn to smith an iron helmet, I visit the inn, I chase a dog around the cobbled roads while playing tag with some local children. Some of these are listed as quests, but none seem to demand I actually go anywhere yet. But then, at last, I find it! A quest to direct my attention! A local merchant needs someone to find a bandit who stole one of his prized possessions. I confidently walk down the road that leads out of town, but the second that I take a step away from the town, I am immediately lost. There are some rough wooden signs that gesture one way or another, but how do I get to the place where the bandits are hiding out? The world is so big, I don't know enough about this place to just set off. I duck back into the shop, sheepishly purchase a spell called "Clairvoyance," and cast it. A spectral blue light bursts out in front of me, guiding me and showing me the path to the quest. It adjusts as I move with it, supplying a clear direction. I feel better and head off to my first real quest in a big, fancy tomb.

Two hours later, I leave the tomb and bandits behind and never cast that spell again. I get it now. I don't need it.

Such a different kind of space without direct expectations of time was confusing to me at first, and it took me until I completed that first quest to really understand that I was free to dawdle if I wanted to, free to go in whatever direction I cared to, free to spend my time how I pleased. I didn't have to play the game at any particular pace or go to a location at any particular moment. As I'll discuss in Chapter 5, my experience during the first tomb quest taught me how I was able to find direction without being tied to a particular way to play. I more or less learned that my queer ways of play were welcomed in this space, that failing to meet the expectations of normative play was possible, even encouraged, in this world. Failure is always an option in games, but failure is not a negative thing in *Skyrim* so much as one of many ways to play.

With this in mind, I explore *Skyrim* as a queer experiential text. That text contains not only the software, but also my own experiences—physical, emotional, environmental—as part of that text.

This text contains my failures, my successes, my normative and non-normative play, as well as my queer interpretations of the text. *Skyrim* is a queer text when I play it in that I am queerly experiencing it. But it can also be a queer text for anyone experiencing it, as queer ways of playing and understanding the game are supported by it structurally. When others play *Skyrim*, they have access to the same queer possibilities that I do when I play. But my question became, does the queer structure of time and space within the game allow players to resist the white hegemony of the text's content? Can a chronotope born of whiteness truly support resistance?

Queering Close Reading

Close reading is complex in a video game. In reading closely, we perform in-detail observation and analysis of both granular detail as well as wide-scale patterns. When close reading dialogically, analysis is focused not just on the details and patterns of the text, but on the additional meaning in those details and patterns as they reach outwards from the text and towards each other. While a single occurrence of detail or pattern, or an utterance, in Bakhtin's words, will develop its own forms of connotation and meaning within a text, the wider convergence of many utterances becomes a heteroglossic language.

Bakhtin's own context—1930s Russia—casts a great many meanings upon his writing. But of most interest to my own research is that of media; Bakhtin wrote about novels to explain his philosophy of language, as it was the predominant medium and form of his day. In the years since the translation of his work into English, European and colonial-settler scholars have applied dialogism to a great number of written and verbal subjects, and dialogism has long been a welcome addition to the colonial-settler discourse analysis canon, as well as literary theory canon. However, dialogism has also been applied to non-verbal and non-written media as well.

The importance of the visual is well-documented and well-studied over the last three decades. In 1995, Deborah J. Haynes wrote *Bakhtin and the Visual Arts*, which explored dialogism in painting and sculpture. More recent, studies such as Joanne Cassar and George Cremona's dialogic study of graffiti (2016, 155), Joshua Gregory Novalis' thesis (2017) on visual and textual dialogism in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, or Soheil Ashrafi's analysis of a "visual manifestation of the United Nations' universal declaration of human rights" (2016, 91) are examples within the last five years or so. In 2014, Miriam Jordan-Haladyn wrote *Dialogic Materialism: Bakhtin, Embodiment, and Moving Image Art*, where she argued that:

"The verbal and the visual are inextricably bound together and as such it makes sense to consider the implications of Bakhtin's usage of visual, aural and corporeal terms to describe dialogism [. . .] the observer of art dialogically engages with the utterance or artwork by literally giving living form to what the artist communicates by translating what is visible into verbal meaning and in doing so brings art into contact with the corporeal and all its sensorial and emotional capacities. A dialogic response to art depends upon the bodies of observers, those whose bodies literally bring artwork into contact with life, through their contexts, perceptions, emotions, thoughts and responsive actions to what they see." (2014, 7).

While many are reluctant to call video games a form of art (and the argument of whether or not games are or can be art is as old as video games themselves), I enter my analysis of video games under the assumption that games are indeed art, and as such, they can and should be critiqued, analyzed, and studied for their cultural and social meanings, impacts, and perspectives on the world. Reading the "languages" as such allows us to examine the dialogic-esque relationships that occur in these languages and explore the give-and-take and interplay of different forces of games as a text, as opposed to focusing solely on literal dialogue or literal text (although those are also discussed as part of the fictional spaces of a game).

My queer lens is crucial to this point, as the intention here is not to create a set of binaries nor to set up monolith or hegemonic taxonomies. Rather, I am seeking moments of resonance between

queer theory, game narrative, and their dialogic languages. As Esther Peeren explains in her book *Intersubjectivities and Popular Culture: Bakhtin and Beyond*, “The object does not disappear under the theory, but lights up those elements of the theory that do not always present a perfect fit” (2008, 9). This project is equally invested in seeing where dialogism fails game narrative theory, where it rejects and injures, where it lights up and sings, because each instance—even the failures or lack of connection—still informs us as game narrative scholars. Moving beyond the binary of success/failure is one of the many traits of dialogic analysis, and the specific ways game stories resonate with harmony, without harmony, or in new ways entirely.

In order to both close read as well as play queerly, I here define three dimensions of my own queer play: what I refer to as emotional play, rules play, and narrative play. I use these terms to describe the different kinds of queer play that I engage in, whether doing so critically or for fun.

- 1) Emotional play consists of intentionally engaging with dialogics that impact me in ways that may or may not be unique to my own context. Playing queerly has made me proud, aggravated, dedicated, resistant, sexual, vulnerable, poisonous, aggressive, fearful, spiteful. Empathetic and sympathetic and pathetic. It has made me numb. It has made me joyful. This can involve things like purposefully making decisions that will hurt my feelings for the purposes of experiencing the sensation without consequences beyond my game and my immediate mood or choosing a play style that I feel resonates with the game more than my abilities or interests. Queer emotional play can involve purposefully triggering myself to the violence of past traumas in a safe environment. It can involve sleepless nights of curiosity and wonder. It can involve blankly staring at the same screen in the worst of a depressive period, trying to feel something, anything. Deliberate

emotional play is allowing yourself to be vulnerable to the space and time you embody and experience while consenting to allow what emotions may come to run their course.

- 2) Rules play relates more to the prickliness of queerness, an instinct lovingly referred to by many queer folks as the “queer as in fuck you” rallying cry (Ruberg and Phillips 2018)¹⁶. There is no denying that queer rules-play is still deeply emotional, but the motivation behind the play is different. Playing with the rules, for me, is deeply related to the intersection of Muñoz’s hope and Edelman’s negativity. If I don’t belong here, I will bend every rule I can first before I have to bend my own identity. I like to see what pieces and parts of this game world I can push to the limits and which ones I can’t. Rules-play is bending the deep-seated sorrow and anger of my own queerness to burn the world to the ground because in this space, *I can*, and my anger is beautiful and positive. I enjoy seeing what I am asked to accept and what I am forced to accept, and I am hurt by seeing what I am asked to accept and what I am forced to accept. It hurts, it has made me cry while playing and later while thinking about what I did in a game. The choices I made to act or not to act. The things I accepted in the game that I couldn’t in my own life, or the chances I could have in a different time, place, or body. Rules-play is emotional, but it is not playing for the express purpose of eliciting and experiencing emotions, but instead, playing to push boundaries, to play with binaries, to shift definitions of what is and what

¹⁶ As noted in their article taking the first half of the queer rallying cry as the tile, Bo Ruberg and Amanda Phillips note in their Game Studies article “Not Gay as in Happy: Queer Resistance and Video Games,” that “the origins of this phrase are difficult to track down” and “We can speculate that it comes from the same militant spirit that caused queers to embrace a slur as an identity in the first place, combined with the tongue-in-cheek clarification “not gay as in happy” as the word “gay” shifted meaning over the course of the 20th century.” They also note the rallying cry for its anger, inspired by women of color feminists like Audre Lorde.

is not possible, sheerly because I can. For example, rules-play might involve dedicating hours to find a glitch or break in the system that allows me to change the way I look or how I can interact with the game.

- 3) A third element of queer play is playing with narratives and stories. This is often deeply linked to temporal experiences and embodiment, tying back to Halberstam's conception of queer time. Playing queerly, for me, is often about changing the story—changing the pacing, the focus, the engagement, the narrative. In game or out of game, I plan and arrange my actions to suit the story I want to tell consciously or unconsciously. Playing with narratives ignores my required tasks and sees me focus on something minor, insignificant, and find significance in it. The way I play is too slow at times, too fast at others; I will dash my way through some parts of the game only to dawdle and resist progress at others. I will mod and alter the game to delay linear progress to see what happens then. I play and I replay. Repeat and repeat and repeat. I will ignore markers of linearity and move at my own pace, to my own interests, to my own detriment or delight. Queer narrative play is deeply time-consuming. However, the motivation behind the type of play is important; I do not engage in this kind of play for the purposes of changing linearities or time or progress, but out of the desire and interest to seek different stories, different pathways, different voices. To paraphrase Ruberg, to play life differently (2019).

These dimensions of queer play are not unique to my own playing preferences or play purposes, but also, they are not taxonomical. Others will play in ways better suited to themselves and may or may not play queerly in the same ways I play queerly; in example, Amanda Phillips' work on necropolitics and the spectacle of death in games explores death from a queer lens, and to Phillips, the imaginative,

impossible displays of the body in death, dying, and respawning is queer (2019)—very different foci from my own, which is more in line with Aubrey Anable’s work in the 2018 *Playing With Feelings*, which explores how games allow us, as players, to “rehearse” feelings, states, and emotions.

However, my own descriptions can be helpful heuristics to better understand what I mean by “play queerly” as opposed to playing more traditionally and within the traditions of the hegemony of play, which requires players to have goals of optimization rather than the less defined goals of queer play.

Race and Dialogism

To explore race and racialization from a dialogic perspective means to consider the ways that conceptual whiteness is communicated within the game’s various multimodalities, as previously discussed. However, this study does not exclude the literal dialogue of characters within the game. The reason I explore spatial and temporal dialogics is because games are an experiential medium; literal spoken or written dialogues are never without temporal and spatial contexts that influence the ways players interact with the content of the game. Within the game, literal dialogues are suspended in time and place, deeply influenced by the context of their utterance. While this is true to a point with any media, the difference is the layers of context. Reading a book has an experiential context of a non-diegetic environment and time, of course. Reading a novel for university—late at night, struggling to get the last few pages of an assigned reading finished—will result in a different dialogic relationship than reading a novel for pleasure on a sunny beach while on vacation. But the difference is that there is a non-diegetic *and* diegetic context of time and space in games that influences the ways dialogues are encountered, which impacts the ways that players interact and engage with them. In short, the contexts that dialogics are subject to are twofold in a game, resulting in large-scale impacts on the ways that players interpret, normalize, and enact ideologies.

Many game narrative scholars and queer scholars have pointed towards phenomenology as a way of understanding queer narratives. In “Queer Theory, the Body, and Video Games,” Derek A. Burrill argues that:

Often, narrative in games is assumed to be constructed from discrete units both modal and thematic, with tacit acknowledgment of player and designer exegesis. A queer understanding of narratology would necessarily focus on difference as a functional epistemology and praxis, moving beyond the binaries of plot/story, or *histoire/discours*. (2017, 27).

A form of queer form of narratology, then, is not one that is modal or thematic, but something else entirely. Burrill points towards Sara Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology* as one way of understanding the queer structure of video games. But it is important to remember that, in Ahmed’s own words, queer phenomenology is “not ‘properly’ phenomenological” (2006, 2) in the sense that queer phenomenology does not always attend to intentionality as traditionally as most phenomenological methods. Instead, queer phenomenology explores the ways that we are both intentionally and “unintentionally” situated into a space and set of experiences. The dialogues of the differing structures of embodiment and difference becomes crucial in discussing play and narrative, but it is one part of a multifaceted structure. Sara Ahmed writes:

[P]henomenology makes “orientation” central in the very argument that consciousness is always directed “toward” an object, and given its emphasis on the lived experience of inhabiting a body. . . It emphasizes the importance of lived experience, the intentionality of consciousness, the significance of nearness or what is ready-at-hand, and the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds. (Ahmed 2006, 2)

Here, Ahmed sets up an important relationship between the experience and the structure of an experience. Orientation, sexual or otherwise, refers to relative positions and directions, as well as the familiarization of and relationship to beliefs or knowledge. A queer orientation, sexually, refers to a perceived deviation from the normative position of heterosexuality. A queer orientation in all other matters refers to the defamiliarization of heteronormativity and lived experience, or “by redirecting

our attention toward different objects, those that are ‘less proximate’” (Ahmed 2006, 3). Embodiment is certainly related to spaces, but moreover, it is a practice of events over time. In the same way that a compass orients us north, south, east, and west, *Skryim* orients us towards specific kinds of interactions, stories, and expectations. To reiterate Ahmed’s thinking here, there is a strong relationship between the structure of an experience and the experience or embodiment of that experience. She notes that queer phenomenology acts to:

“show how bodies are gendered, sexualized, and raced by how they extend into space, as an extension that differentiates between ‘left’ and ‘right,’ ‘front’ and ‘behind,’ ‘up’ and ‘down,’ as well as ‘near’ and ‘far.’ What is offered, in other words, is a model of how bodies become orientated by how they take up time and space.” (Ahmed 2006, 5).

As such, my examinations of the game focused on the meeting places of spatial and temporal dialogics and white supremacist ideology. I observe the ways that the game requires me to embody myself in ways that recognize, portray, perform, and occasionally oppose, white supremacy. I understand white supremacy as a “web of ideology, systems, privileges, and personal beliefs that create unequal outcomes along racial lines across multiple categories of life” (Belew and Gutiérrez 2021, 5). Ideology, in this instance, refers to the ways that ideas are normalized, strengthened, and defined by a culture. When I discuss whiteness, I refer to:

“a socially constructed category that has changed dramatically over the course of United States history. In early America, whiteness worked as a political affinity among different ethnic groups. Not until the nineteenth century did racial pseudoscience introduce the idea of “white” as a biological marker. Even this whiteness changed over time, expanding to include previously excluded groups like Irish, Jewish, Italian, and Polish immigrants in the early twentieth century. And all along the way, whiteness was determined at the local level largely by individual bureaucrats, who variously held the line on strict standards or allowed passing and mutable boundaries as the local context required” (Belew and Gutiérrez 2021, 6).

The former exclusion of ethnic populations is still felt, and many members of those populations still feel excluded from perceptions of whiteness or do not identify as white. But whiteness as a whole is a

regulatory framework to appropriate and distribute power from other populations to its own. As stated by Kai Linke,

“Whenever I use the term ‘race’ or ‘racial’ . . . I always refer to the historically contingent process of racialization, which positions people differently within the respective social matrix, *not* to any assumed biological differences between people (2021, 40 emphasis original).

This kind of framework is a power structure even in a game like *Skyrim*. However, it is crucial to remember that whiteness is a social construct even as it is represented in the game as biological, to be discussed in upcoming chapters—which is one of the large-scale concerns I have for the game’s portrayal of whiteness. But the real-world threads of ideology that are drawn upon by this biological approach to race is one of the many dialogues through which *Skyrim* unintentionally intersects with white supremacist thinking.

Game Studies, as a field, is not without interventions on race, colonial violence, and white supremacy. Some of the foundation studies of white supremacy and its impacts on games, including Souvik Mukherjee’s work on colonialism in games (2016; 2017); racialized scholars’ work on Blackness in games (Gray 2016; Gray and Leonard 2018; Russworm 2018) Asianess in games (Fickle 2019), and race more widely in digital media (Malkowski and Russworm 2017; Nakamura 2008; Brock 2020). Gray (2016) argues that white supremacy manifests in games through the activities of white players, and Brock (2020) contends that digital media, as a whole, is built by and for white people to empower whiteness. These are crucial discussions of how colonial power and racialized representation in games act in tandem to other and exclude non-white experiences.

Race, in the world of the *Elder Scrolls* is biological as well as social. In *Skyrim*, there are ten playable races, although in the *Elder Scrolls* universe, there are many more races. There are humans, elves, and neither-human-nor-elves, categorically lumped together as “Beastfolk.” There are deep lines of discrimination between all playable races, to various degrees. In this way, the *Elder Scrolls*

universe mirrors our real-world racisms—there is longstanding social and historical strife. But biologically, where real-world humans all share a common ancestor, the races of the Elder Scrolls world do not. They are separate species, and with the exception of Breton people (who are considered humans, but are partially elf biologically), there are no representations of multi-race children or adults in *Skyrim*. All sentient beings are considered to be of their one single race and have the abilities of that race without fail. All Bretons are good at magic. All Wood Elves are talented archers. All Nords are resistant to cold. Such mechanics allow players to engage in different gameplay experiences; however, the conflation of biological ability with race and ethnicity sets a dangerous precedent that fantasy genre games are only beginning to contend with; for example, Dungeons and Dragons—the hallmark fantasy role-playing game arguably at the roots of all open-world RPGs like *Skyrim* and others—is only attempting to remove biological race from its game in 2022, and not without issue (Plunket 2022)¹⁷.

The crucial thing here is that the kinds of discrimination we see in real life is based on social and cultural traditions only. There are no biological factors like what we see in the Elder Scrolls that separate real people—and the kinds of violence we see in the Elder Scrolls universe based on concepts of biological race is unacceptable regardless. As Richard Dyer famously reminds us, race is imagery with longstanding, constant impacts (2016, 9). Race is also imagery in *Skyrim*—very literally, as all its fictional representations are images—but diegetically, race impacts the abilities, skills, and weaknesses of characters. So not only is race in the game is biological and then connected to political and cultural forces—as opposed to conceptions of race being created by political and cultural forces of oppression—which begins to orient players into white supremacist beliefs right

¹⁷ Replacing "race" with "species" will, in fact, maintain the white supremacist ideology that they are trying to avoid.

from the start. Beginning at this foundation, I then observe and map out the structures within the game that might inhibit or encourage this line of belief within the game.

Uncomfortably Close

As a researcher performing close reading and cultural critiques of narrative, I am constantly a subject of the structures and powers I am studying—as Nina Lykke writes, “participant in and in compliance with the analyzed world” (2012, 5). At the same time, I fully expect that my experiences and my analyses are not practical for many players and that there will always be those who play the same games as me but see no trace of the critiques I make.

In his famous analysis of Hitchcock’s *Rope*, D.A. Miller explains, “I am still certain of what I have *seen*, but I am unsure whether it is meant to be *observed*” (2013, 5 emphasis original), stating the representation of stories may or may not include intentional meanings and are designed to shape the expectations of what we, as readers, viewers, or players might take away from it. He questions his observations and the validity or importance of them, writing:

I may be looking too closely at it, and, in consequence of this fixation, find myself exiled—alone, eccentric, “touched”—from the community of spectators to which I had confidently belonged only seconds before. In trying so hard to be the good spectator, have I really become a bad one? (2013, 5).

Does a “good” reader of games play with or against the grain of hegemonic play? Or someplace in between? It is a source of anxiety for many scholars and players who find meanings in media that others reject or did not see. Heteronormativity would dictate a right and a wrong way to represent, embody, or experience that is tied into the hegemony of play, rendering invisible other ways of being and knowing a time or a space or a body.

As part of queer game scholarship, we must reject this and allow ourselves to play too closely. Ruberg makes this argument as well, also drawing on Miller to say that “Instead of allowing

the meanings of video games to remain distant, [we] delve deeply, embracing the queer intimacy that forms between scholar and game” (2019, 21). Any time we find traces of meanings that we “shouldn’t be,” we challenge the hegemony of play. It is a part of reclaiming games for those who do not fit into the hegemony of play. And there will always be those who consciously and unconsciously defend hegemony of all kinds. Edmond Chang notes that close-readings of games often results in defensive denials, distress, resistance to other viewpoints, and even outright hostility (2010)— comments like “you’re looking too close,” “you’re looking for things to dislike,” “I didn’t interpret it that way/experience it that way,” and my favorite, “you’re just biased” are common reactions to close-reading games, as if there is only one possible right answer or correct interpretation. I am, simply enough, “playing the ‘wrong’ way,” reading the wrong way, finding “wrong” meanings and tensions and pleasures in the game (Ruberg 2019, 18) according to the hegemony of play, but there is much value to be found in disrupting and complicating the relationships between game structures and the ways those structures narrate game stories.

Performing this work both queerly and dialogically means locating the boundaries of modalities in my sample texts, and then testing and interpreting those boundaries’ meanings. The result of this kind of “too-closeness” allows us to find “a whole hidden level of [text] that, whether because its signs are too small, or too fleeting, or too peripheral, or too close to the obvious visual focus, we are ordinarily prevented from reading” (Miller 2013, 12). In the case of video games, it is the hegemony of play that often hides different levels of text and meaning.

My queerness and my closeness or distance to my texts impacts my research, but it is a strength of my methods, not a weakness. The emotionality, the vulnerability and prickliness of queerness, the subjectivity of my experiences and identity are a crucial part of how I understand and interpret games. Returning to Lykke, I strongly agree with her when she states:

Central to my understanding of feminist theorizing is a belief in a politics of location and an epistemology of situated and partial knowledges. This implies that the landscape must always be understood as seen from a non-innocent somewhere, and that the author has an obligation to make herself accountable for her location in it. (2012, 4).

Having come to writing this dissertation from the discipline of literary studies, I have a background in close reading, symptomatic hermeneutics, and a predominantly white-cis-male canon of narrative studies. As a cisgender white woman, I understand that my queerness in no shape or form prevents the privileges of my gender and race from impacting the ways I understand the world; most of my assumptions must be challenged and my interpretations are always subject to these lenses. However, there is deep value in performing this labor in both game studies and games culture; as Ruberg reminds us, “the politics of queer play echo outward across games communities, games history, the games industry, and into wide-reaching contemporary concerns around identity, marginalization, and agency in digital media” (1). While I engage in critical gameplay, I keep the game close to my own experiences and identity, but as a scholar invested in queer and feminist media research, I am allowed the privilege of time and space to revisit, reconsider, and revise my interpretations. In my analysis and critique, I pay particular attention to the creation of meaning-making and story within these different structural models of game narrative. Especially noteworthy to me are instances where hegemony and resistance meet dialogically; these moments of tension, erasure, violence, subsumption, and conflict reveal insights to not only the meaning of the story, but to underlying assumptions about political and systemic power in games culture.

This is what I refer to as the chronotope of domination: it is the ways in which time and space are organized to dominate. This domination can be seen in the multiple “languages” of the game—the five planes of Nitsche, as broad examples of languages act to show how different parts of a video game work in tandem, but also how those planes can be dominated by one another. Domination also occurs as a kind of chronotope when we consider what kinds of analyses we can draw from instances

where the spatial is dominant over the temporal (Chapter 5) or temporal over the spatial (Chapter 6). But mostly, I examine the ways that whiteness acts to dominate queerness in this game; the ways that whiteness and queerness *can* resonate (as well as all the ways they disharmonize) acts as a warning for queer scholars and queer players to remain aware of the dialogic relationships that exist between queer play and white play.

Conclusion: Not Gay[ming] as in Happy, Queer [Gaming] as in “Fuck You”

Keeping the game close—emotionally, mentally, meaningfully—I play critically for scholarship, close-reading and seeking answers to questions, locating and mapping moments, feelings, people, and technologies that may help answer them. I am a white, queer ciswoman who struggles with mental illness and a lifelong autoimmune disease. But as Ruberg reminds us, in playing games queerly, I am doing more than just playing as a white, queer ciswoman whose body is filled with antipsychotics, ibuprofen, caffeine, antinuclear antibodies, and doubt. When I play queerly, I am playing with the push and pull of power structures. I am finding and engaging in forms of pleasure I otherwise cannot. I am embodying the affect of differences that my own body—for political, emotional, personal, physical, ethical, geographical, social, economic, reasons—cannot.

Many people have played and enjoyed the games and stories I am discussing without having experienced the same kind of tensions. To be clear, I am not arguing that there is a singular meaning or even a gestalt necessity within the narratives of these games. In fact, it does not matter if others have or have not experienced or noticed the same dialogs; the dialogism remains, regardless of the kinds of individual dialogs that resonate in the player.

Putting the structures of gameplay into narrative terms becomes complicated, but thinking of them in terms of Bakhtinian novelistic discourses helps to separate and note the arrangement of the various forces of gameplay. When referring to the novelistic, I refer to “artistic prose” as Bakhtin

does (260). “Novelistic” refers to the stylistic traits of arranged or narrated prose, predominantly seen in novels as a form—hence novels acting as the namesake of “novelistic.” Games are novelistic in both the sense of their writing, which is artistic prose (the text of the game as well as the game as a text), but in terms of their narration by players to themselves as well. Players arrange and rearrange the audio, visual, and tactile events of a game into a narrative that makes sense to them and sometimes may be narrated to others afterwards (say if a player tells a friend about an experience). The player is not the author, but the narrator of fictional experiences into a gestalt whole. Each chapter will approach one of the ways that time and space are styled within the game and how the player interacts with temporal and spatial languages to narrate their experiences.

In expanding Bakhtinian dialogism with queer theory, I am reclaiming a critical theory to help explore queer experiences, but this can run the risk of trivializing the real-life experiences of queer people. Queering dialogism is a method of accessing a queer lens, of understanding how queerness performs as an epistemology and structure of experience. This cannot be conflated with the traditional lenses of critical thinking, such as Marxist, ecocritical, postmodernist, psychoanalytic, or even queer theory itself. It is always possible to enact close reading analyses through a queer lens, but that does not equate to understanding the real, lived experiences of queerness. This belongs solely to queer people. That is ours. Queer dialogism is not a way to understand queer people’s experiences; it is a way to understand social relationships, systems of power, and cultural hegemony through a non-normative lens, which illuminates possibilities for more anti-colonial, anti-racist, and intersectional scholarship, activism, and cultural reformation.

Chapter 4: Chronotope

Introduction

Temporal and spatial relationships are never truly divisible, and while the forthcoming chapters focus on portions of the game where either dimension of the game's narrative structures resonates most strongly, to begin the analysis I bring forward the most readily observable—space and time connected. While later chapters cannot help but note the presence of time within space, and vice-versa, this chapter focuses specifically on what Bakhtin calls timespace, or chronotope. The ways that timespace is formed within the game reproduces a common chronotope within video games, that of domination. Specifically in this chapter, I look towards visual representations and interactive objects as modalities of communication, of dialogic languages. Within *Skyrim*, these languages are most recognizable in the representation of space over time; not time that the player spends in the space, but the past only as knowable through present-day interactions and observations, objects within in the game that represent the diegetic past.

The past, present, and future of *Skyrim*'s spaces linger intertwined throughout the game in multiple interactive ways, ranging from the more ephemeral narration of books and journals within the game, to the more lasting narrative of buildings and architecture in the game's spaces. *Skyrim*'s dialogic systems orient players through a chronotope of domination, one that structures white supremacist ideologies and silences resistance. The neomedievalist setting of the game impacts the ways that the various modalities of *Skyrim* communicate, and the narrative impact of the chronotope of domination can be seen throughout the game, as I illustrate through a close reading of the narrative architectures of Markarth, one of the main cities of *Skyrim*. These impacts act to direct our attention and desires as the game familiarizes and perpetuates ideological and cultural positions. The domination of space and time is represented by the continually dominated city of Markarth and the

dialogues represented by books and written materials. In these cases, the dialogic tensions act to normalize colonization as unavoidable, natural acts of humanity as opposed to ideologically motivated by white supremacist frameworks.

A Chronotope of Domination

A chronotope, in literature, can be measured by the depiction of time and space. Returning to Bemong and Borghart (2010), a chronotope:

- (1) has narrative, plot-generating significance;
- (2) has representational significance;
- (3) provides a basis for distinguishing genre;
- and (4) has semantic significance. (Bemong and Borghart 2010, 6).

In their study of the chronotope, Michael Piero and Marc Ouellette argue that *Skyrim* is marked by a the chronotope of the “labor idyll”:

In *Skyrim*, the dyad of labor presents itself, in part, through the patriarchal *oikos* that includes an ‘heroic’ household figure. [. . .] The chronotope of the family-idyllic insists that a player-reader looks for—in this case—the patriarchal *oikos* inherent to the essentialized family-idyllic landscape of the game, not only with regard to its thematics, but also the very construction of specific timespace organizations: cities, orphanages, guild halls, villages, and so on. This becomes important because thorough their disparate characteristics, each locale represents timespace in a way that called attention to the family—and the labor idyllic (Piero and Ouellette 2021, 123)

Labor is certainly idyllic in open-world RPGs, making it part of Bemong and Borghart’s third qualification of a chronotope,—each quest the player undertakes involves labor of some degree, collapsing the line between work and play for the Dragonborn specifically. Adventuring is work in this world, after all. But the specific references to “family-idyllic landscapes,” gesturing towards the “cities, orphanages, guild halls, villages” (Piero and Ouellette 2021, 123) is a bit misleading. For example, they say “orphanages” when there is only a single orphanage in the entire province—it is

not a common building, and the only orphanage in the province is also the most criminally active city, host of the Thieves Guild. While the argument can be there to make the Thieves Guild a family of sorts, it is far from the idyllic that Piero and Ouellette paint. While the dynamics of family will be discussed in Chapter Six, Piero and Ouellette's reading of *Skyrim* is based on heteronormative expectations of family and time; the heteronormative is present in the game, but it is not the experience of the Dragonborn, even if players attempt to engage in the idyllic.

I would propose instead that *Skyrim* features what I coin as a chronotope of domination. With a queer reading of *Skyrim*, a different organization of timespace becomes clear. The construction of spaces is certainly split between wilderness and cities, villages, and so on, but through a queer lens the timespace does not call attention to family and labor, but instead on the domination of space and time through skill. There is certainly labor involved with domination (it takes work to be the best and dominate everything) but it is gruesome work and represented as such—repetitive, bloody, illegal, and dangerous. Far from idyllic.

As will be discussed in detail in upcoming chapters, queer time and queer space allow for new perspectives away from the heteronormative, heterosexual family idyll, revealing something insidious—we can see the ways that white supremacist motifs and covert racism are telegraphed through gameplay. The timespaces of *Skyrim* can decentralize parts of the plotted narrative in ways that are anti-racist, such as players choosing not to participate in the civil war questlines or playing queerly. However, as the very foundations of the game are focused on domination, the ability of queer play to imagine life differently is stunted. Both space and time in *Skyrim* warp around the player and their abilities. The chronotope of domination is an overarching combination of gameplay mechanics, narrative environments, and player interactions.

First, domination has “narrative, plot-generating significance” (Bemong and Borghart 2010, 6) within the game. Vice notes that chronotope is especially “fruitful” when explored in texts of historical prominence, or texts portraying clear relationships between time and space, such as travel or road-trip narratives or stories about time-travel (1997, 202). We see both these in *Skyrim*. The adventures of the Dragonborn take them on a journey throughout Skyrim, but the goal of any space in the game is to dominate it. The narrative and plot are focused around the consolidation of power and dominance over different parts of Skyrim’s spaces and people as the Dragonborn. The main questline focuses on the domination of dragons, which represent history, and even defeating death itself. The player is literally thrust back in history to witness the original defeat of Alduin, the draconic antagonist of the game (in both senses of the word “draconic”), who was not actually defeated but thrown forward in time to the present. Alduin symbolically and literally represents the end of time and death; each time he is defeated, his spirit returns to the afterlife, where he devours the souls of the dead, revitalizing him and returning him to the mortal plane. Therefore, the Dragonborn first must defeat the dragon in the mortal plane, enter the Nordic afterlife while still living, destroy Alduin in death, and return to the land of the living¹⁸. So, we again see a journey, but the purpose of the journey, from beginning to end, is to grow in strength until it is possible to dominate the “end of time” himself—Alduin. Simultaneously, the player has the ability to dominate time through actions like quick-travel (moving across the map without experiencing the time involved), kill-cams (cinematic rearrangements of time for the purpose of bloody spectacle, to be discussed later in this

¹⁸ There are multiple versions of the afterlife in *The Elder Scrolls*—why Alduin is tied to the Nordic afterlife in particular is unknown. The player is also promised a place in the Nordic afterlife upon their success, despite the fact that it is reserved for Nordic warriors, which the player may not be. The questline as a whole makes the most sense if the Dragonborn is a Nord, but can be completed by Dragonborns of any race.

chapter), saving mechanics (which allows the player to functionally relive/reperform/change course at any moment of the game) and other forms of temporal manipulation allowed to the Dragonborn as a result of being a player-character within the setting.

Next, the “representational significance” (Bemong and Borghart 2010, 6) of domination is clear. The representation of power structures within the spaces of the game also is signified by the domination of skills. Typical markers of power in our own society—wealth, political standing, fame, or tradition for example—are all overcome by the Dragonborn’s skills in battle. Politically, not only can the Dragonborn earn roles of high standing, but through the Dragonborn’s actions and choices, they decide who becomes Jarl of each province and who loses power¹⁹. Moreover, throughout the game, the Dragonborn can become Thane of each inner province of Skyrim—a noble’s title signifying the Dragonborn’s political power. Political power, in these cases, is won through earning the favor of each province’s Jarl by completing tasks on their behalf. These tasks often involve skill in battle—whether that is martial, stealth-based, or magical prowess is up to the player, but political gain is connected with adventuring and the domination of space.

Wealth, the measurement of power in capitalism, is also granted to the player through their abilities in battle. Earning coin the old-fashioned way, as a mercenary, is simple enough and provides plentiful work fulfilling contracts to displace bandits or hunt giants. But the player also, in their journeys as the Dragonborn, plunders ancient tombs for gold as well. Players must explore these tombs to gain skills as the Dragonborn through their Voice abilities—to be discussed in detail in soon—so collecting wealth is also connected to gaining skills and dominating space. The Dragonborn

¹⁹ Deposed Jarls and their courts are forced into house arrest. The player is able to visit them, often located in a basement area of a castle or keep. They live comfortable, but powerless lives. And they are not fond of the Dragonborn who put them there.

also can earn the title and leadership roles within guilds within the game, such as the Thieves Guild, the Dark Brotherhood, the College of Winterhold, or the Companions—signifying the Dragonborn’s martial, stealth, and magical prowess and mastery of these skills. In this world, blunt force and unskilled violence are useful, but always will be overwhelmed by skill. There are many unskilled combatants in *Skyrim*, and the Dragonborn must defeat them in order to dominate the spaces. Areas overrun by bandits, hostile forces, and wild animals are unskilled and untamed. Only the power of the Dragonborn can bring them to order.

Third, domination “provides a basis for distinguishing genre” (Bemong and Borghart 2010, 6). The very nature of open-world RPGs are chronotropic in the way that distance and proximity work together, a link between time and space. These mechanics, standard of the open-world RPG genre, interact with the narrative by placing the Dragonborn (or the player’s character, in other games) at the center of everything. All time and space narrows its focus onto the actions and interactions of the player. But what this means is thematically, you are a lone figure creating and manipulating history, moving between diegetic events which are mapped onto locations seemingly at random. The lone figure at the center of history, surrounded by diegetically poignant moments, becomes crucial to the chronotope of domination. The RPG genre as a whole becomes a narrative of self-improvement, but that growth is always, without fail, only developed with the intention of dominating others. While time typically passes at an expected pace—one minute of “real time” of gameplay is 20 minutes within the game, or an hour of time in *Skyrim* is three minutes of gameplay time—but the player has the ability to instantly go forward in time via the “Wait” feature, making the already accelerated pace of time subject to constant the Dragonborn’s whims.

Finally, there is a “semantic significance” (Bemong and Borghart 2010, 6) to domination throughout the game. While one can gesture towards changes in text itself as the world becomes

dominated, a more visceral and simultaneously, a more abstract example of semantics in the game comes from the power of language. That is to say, language itself literally becomes a kind of power, not just in terms of charm or charisma, but because of the Dragonborn's Voice abilities. The Voice manifests in the Dragonborn as the ability to produce mythical "Shouts" (literally from their mouth) that take on magical abilities based on the words spoken. When I play on the PC, I can Shout by hitting the middle mouse button/mouse wheel. There is a cooldown timer on how often you can use these abilities, but they give (typically offensive) abilities for the Dragonborn's use. Some shouts manipulate time, others force other creatures to act on your behalf. For example, one shout—Dismay (Faas Ru Maar in Dragon language, Fear Run Terror in English)—causes enemies to flee in terror away from the Dragonborn. The most commonly used Shout—earliest learned and most famous in terms of gameplay culture and memes—is Unrelenting Force (Fus Ro Duh/ Force Balance Push), which projects the words of the shout outwards from the Dragonborn and physically shoves enemies, allies, objects, and creatures away from them. The Dragonborn's ability to speak the language of Dragons and extract and manipulate power from them becomes a literal manifestation of semantic meaning—an unusual example of semantic meaning, but prominent one in the game.

Beyond Bemong and Borghart's definition, we can look to the arrangement of time and space to assist in defining the chronotope of domination. The ways "time takes on flesh" (Bakhtin 1981, 84) also hinge on acts of control and domination. The player has the ability to speed up time by using the "Wait" feature, allowing the player to change temporality forward. This feature is often used by players to change from daytime to nighttime or vice versa. But the player also has the ability to go back in time via the save system; players can save the game at any point and then return to that point later on, depending on if they are pleased with the consequences of their actions. But the majority of gameplay time is spent in acts of violence and domination over space, whether it is through the

consolidation of power described above or simply wandering the wilderness and removing all hostile beings, including animals and random encounters. When defeating an enemy, the player sometimes is presented with a slow-motion animation of the killing blow—the actions of the Dragonborn and their opponent (or victim) dragged out slowly for visual spectacle of blood and a special killing cinematic that may include decapitation, execution-style blows, or slow-motion shots where the camera leaves the Dragonborn and follows an arrow or magical bolt across the space until it strikes an enemy. There are a number of first and third person “kill cam” cinematic moments that specially focus on the act of overcoming and dominating an enemy. These “kill cam” moments can only be activated if the player meets certain conditions, including having weapon proficiency that marks their skill (“Kill Camera”), although there are also occasionally “kill cams” of the Dragonborn being dominated and defeated by an enemy, such as a short animation where a dragon bites the Dragonborn at the neck and shoulders and flips them through the air, the camera settling on the corpse of the Dragonborn just before the game automatically reloads²⁰. Either way, the domination of an enemy acts to cinematically explode time, slowing it and even changing perspective entirely.

So, the arrangement of time—in time spent in the game as well as the player’s perception of time—are focused on domination. But spaces too focus on domination; each locale is a space to be explored, known, and conquered by the Dragonborn and their skill in combat. As in most RPGs, there is a map of the world that players can access. In *Skyrim*, I access the map by pressing the “M” letter key. The world map begins blank, but slowly as the Dragonborn ventures forth, landmarks are noted on the world map. Once a location has been visited, its objectives completed and area explored, it is marked as “Cleared” on the map. But the domination of space is represented in more ways than just the map. In fact, the domination of space is narrated most clearly through the narrative architecture of

²⁰ This is also an example of Amanda Phillips’ necropolitics (2019) at work.

spaces, and rather than an idyllic, the story told by the architecture is a story of domination, time after time. The Dragonborn's journey is to be the stuff of legends—the hero of wars, the conqueror of dragons, the leader against chaos. Said another way, the Dragonborn is creating diegetic history through their actions while at the same time, they interact with diegetic history. But the spaces are dominated by another major consideration of the game and its dialogism—the neomedievalist nature of the game.

Skyrim is, at first blush, set in a fantasy past, resembling a kind of traditional European medieval culture. Roughly aiming to take on the veneer of the Middle Ages, *Skyrim* has kings and castles and swords and shields, among the other expected medieval fare. However, the province of *Skyrim* is nothing like the world of the historical medieval age. Richard Utz refers to this contemporary reimagining of medievalism as neomedieval, noting that:

Neomedieval texts no longer strive for the authenticity of original manuscripts, castles, or cathedrals, but create pseudo-medieval worlds that playfully obliterate history and historical accuracy and replace history-based narratives with simulacra of the medieval, employing images that are neither an original nor the copy of an original, but altogether Neo. (Utz, qtd. in Kline 2014, 4).

Daniel Kline refers to this as a “double vision” (2014, 4), one that simultaneously seeks realism while also ignoring it entirely for the purposes of romanticizing or valorizing particular elements of culture. Some examples of this might include appeals to “a more simple time” or a perceived freedom from the snarls of modern life. Others may gesture towards chivalry codes and valiant heroes. Kline notes that “Game makers have used the medieval past to lend credence to their plotlines, to make exotic their characters, to romanticize their settings, and to give authority to their efforts” and that the “medieval period is not something in the distant past but a present reality, a treasure trove whose contents can be ceaselessly reconfigured for current needs” (2014, 5). This “playful obliteration” (Utz, qtd. in Kline 2014, 4) is rife with political and social implications, many of which are clearly

visible in the various races of *Skyrim*, among any number of fantasy-based games. In rearranging a past that never existed, game developers have carte blanche to imagine worlds however they see fit, for better or for worse. Often times, for worse.

This double-vision resonates deeply with Bakhtin’s concept of double-voicedness; neomedievalism functions through both the conflict and acceptance of ideologically revised history as it meshes (and fails to mesh) with the context of present-day cultural and political power. In particular, *Skyrim* engages with the cultural figure of “the Viking” in its medievalism. The realities of the ancient people we now colloquially call Vikings are far removed from their lives in the same ways that all video games skew all medieval and pre-medieval cultures. The double-voicedness of the playfulness in both video games and neomedievalism itself brings to light a major layer of dialogic tension throughout *Skyrim*: we start to play with the patriarchal white-power fantasy of neomedieval narratives as they clash with the desires and beliefs of the players. As Amy Kaufman and Paul Sturtevant note:

[P]eople who are disenchanted with the innovations of modern society often idealize the Middle Ages as natural and pure, the “original” condition of humankind. These people see the Middle Ages as a landscape for heroism, passion, and legendary deeds. . . The Middle Ages have also been wielded as a weapon when traditional power structures are threatened . . . The fantasy of a pure, orderly patriarchal and monarchical medieval past in which everyone knew his or her place gives people the “historical” evidence they think they need to resist social progress. Using the Middle Ages this way is not just wrong, it is also wrong. By that, we mean it’s not just morally reprehensible—it’s also historically inaccurate. (2020, 7).

The white supremacist idealization of the medieval era tends to be drawn from the false belief that medieval Europe was a white society, even though this is blatantly untrue (Kaufman and Sturtevant 2020, 81; Young 2019, 235). Despite this, white supremacist regimes have long idealized the medieval ages. The Nazi regime looked to the concept of the medieval first German Empire in the Middle Ages as “the heart of [their] self-conception” (Diebold 2019, 105). But the idolization of a

“pure” empire finds its purchase in eighteenth century Enlightenment philosophy masquerading as science, when:

newly emerging scientific discourses and methods were used to categorize humanity into races and subsequently to try to explain differences between the categories of people thus created. This way of thinking held that “races” had fixed characteristics, such as skin and hair color, intelligence, and capacity for artistic expression, that were inherited and persisted unchanged over centuries. Culture, especially language and literature, was held to be the outward expression of the inner characteristics of a race [. . .] The Middle Ages also came to be understood as a period that had occurred only in Europe, with the corollary and erroneous belief that only white people had ancestors in the Middle Ages. The idea of a racially pure Middle Ages thus became crucial to constructing whiteness as an inherent difference between European and all other racial identities. (Young 2019, 236).

Yet wouldn't something like a video game be shunned for espousing Nazi-era politics? One would hope, but because the ideology is embedded more deeply than its immediate content, it takes some additional understanding of the contexts in which players encounter the dialogs of white supremacist belief in order to piece together exactly how players are oriented to accept these belief systems.

Looking at two examples of dialogic languages in *Skyrim* with temporal and spatial qualities—the visual languages of buildings and the interactive languages of books—shows how time-space directs player attention towards certain beliefs and ideas and effectively drawing them away from others.

Skyrim—an Open Book

One notable way that *Skyrim* engages players with a complex system of social and political orientation is in-game objects and texts. While often tied into the concept of environmental storytelling, the use of placed “lore” objects, like books, audio tapes, graffiti, letters, journals, etc., acts as more than just the kinds of environmental storytelling (which I will discuss in Chapter 5.) In defining what she refers to as “indexical storytelling,” Fernández-Vara argues that such objects operate in two ways: to relay the history of the story world left for the player and the history of the player left on the story world (2011, 5-6). While the latter is an important part of many choice-

focused game narratives, it is the former that speaks the most clearly in *Skyrim*, where the majority of history-building indices occurs through the placement of objects. Notably in this space, it is through the placement of written materials throughout the game world. These objects—for the most part, books, letters, and journals—act as social and political orientations to guide the player’s interpretation of different peoples in *Skyrim*.

These written material objects are indexical in that they offer information about characters, environments, objects, and actions, but at times, they also gesture directly towards events that the player can participate in or activate quests through. That makes them different from purely Barthesian indexes (in which indexes do not point to events) or purely sociolinguistic indexes (in which indices point towards the context of an utterance). What Fernández-Vara gestures towards here is more specific to the study of game spaces and follows from Charles Peirce’s philosophy of language (Peirce 1998) where:

. . . indices / indications [mean that] the idea is physically connected with the sign. Peirce provides a sign post as an example (the direction of the signpost is where one should go). Other examples are smoke as an indication of fire, a sneeze denotes a cold (Fernández-Vara 2011, 5).

When applied to games, indices require players to become an “active agent” who “generat[e] stories through traces.” (2011, 5-6). Fernández-Vara argues that:

An index has a relation to the event, often is the consequence of it, which points to something that happened or is going on, inviting the player to reconstruct what happened. The player has to connect the relationship between the sign and the event that it points to . . . indices can work both as indications of what could or should be done in the game (closer to Peirce’s definition), or as indications of what happened in the world before the game started. (2011, 6).

Given this function of indices in video games as an active guide to narrative events, we cannot ignore these optional objects within the game; they have relevance to actions that the player may decide to

undertake. But moreover, they operate dialogically as well as indexically. In the words of Bakhtin, they are related to what he refers to as semi-literary: “Stylization of the various forms of semi-literary (written) everyday narration (the letter, the diary, etc.)” (1981, 262). When it comes to novels, the entire genre of epistolary novels replaces common narration with semi-literary narration to create different systems of tension, conflict, and perspective. Take, for example, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897)—told through the narrative lenses of diary entries, letters between characters, newspaper clippings, an author’s note, etc. This isn’t limited to purely epistolary novels, but any form of explicated writing in a novel shows this heteroglossic style.

This particular stylistic unity is found in many open-world RPGs as a way to supply background information which may be accessed or ignored at the player’s discretion. The practice of drawing together found elements and piecing together a larger story is an act of semi-literary narration, as well as an act of remediation wherein the cultural value of the represented media becomes part of the narration. In-game books carry the authority of the published word. Letters bring with them the officiality of formal communication. Journals and diaries deliver a personal, confidential nature. The hypermediality of books, letters, audio files, and more helps to narrate the past and present of a large space.

But when he refers to semi-literary narration, Bakhtin refers to the formalized genres that are inserted as opposed to what we see in a game, which features literal literary forms as a different kind of language within the game; where semi-literary narration refers to text within a text, what I am referring to is text within an otherwise visual setting. Therefore, I borrow from Bakhtin’s references towards “inserted genres” (1981, 335) and will refer to instances of literature within a game as “inserted textuality.” Such instances of inserted textuality become indexical objects that shape the structure of the player’s experience and quite likely, their interpretation of tacit ideology within that

experience. Given the already skewed dialogics of neomedievalism present in the game, the question arises: is the normalization of white supremacist dialogics in *Skyrim* at all tempered by the rich instances of inserted textuality which are structured into the game? To what are we oriented to in *Skyrim*? What kinds of frames are we placing upon the space-time of *Skyrim*?

To consider the question, I first return to Sara Ahmed's concept of queer phenomenology. When considering how a video game orients us, as players and the generators of meaning-making, the placement of the self into a space is crucial. The ways that we perceive and interpret space are deeply impacted by the ways we encounter it, or as Ahmed says, "who' or 'what' we direct our attention towards" (3). From a heteroglossic standpoint, inserted textuality acts to orient us to perceive different events, actions, and spaces of narrative, however our formation of this inserted textuality knowledge is entirely up to the exploration of spaces both connected and disconnected to the subjects of books, diaries, signs, and other textual devices.

In *Skyrim*, the most developed form of inserted textuality occurs through the game's very notable collection of in-game books. I use "book" as a catch-all phrase for the many novels, history texts, bestiaries, journals, and other reading material. Letters are also a very typical form of inserted textuality in *Skyrim*, as are scrolls, treasure maps, and spell tomes. The use of inserted textual material is especially important to the understanding of the game's chronotope, as I will discuss later in this chapter. In fact, the books scattered across the province are deeply important to understanding the context of the environment and the many ways that the spaces of *Skyrim* act to narrate social, political, and economic tensions. For example, players may find a book describing an area they have never been to; that book, should the player read it, becomes a signpost that suggests potential facts or opinions about that location, guiding the player towards specific beliefs about it. Some books feature long, multipart discussions of Tamriel's history and mythology, others are fictional accounts,

folklore, and plays. All act to inform the player's understanding of spaces and times of the world. While spell tomes and some quest tomes, such as the Black Book series that act as a portal to the zones of Apocrypha²¹, contain little to no readable text, the vast majority of books have multiple pages of text that act to serve as one of the many voices in the dialogues of *Skyrim*. While some of the 820 books and journals in *Skyrim* have the same author, the majority are written by different narrators with varying levels of education, different philosophies and ethics, unique biases and intentions, and many different genres. For example, there are scholarly records and histories, such as *Biography of Queen Barenziah*, which is the "factual" royal retelling of the life of Queen Barenziah, which is written in a blustery historical tone, complete with older spellings of particular words and places, such as when Stern Gamboge, an Imperial Scribe, notes that:

The first volume of this series told the story of Barenziah's origin—heiress to the throne of Mournhold until her father rebelled against His Excellency Tiber Septim I and brought ruin to the province of Morrowind. Thanks largely to the benevolence of the Emperor, the child Barenziah was not destroyed with her parents, but reared by Count Sven of Darkmoor, a loyal Imperial trustee.

On the other hand, *Alduin is Real, and He Ent Akatosh* is written by Thromgar Iron-Head, a self-described "prowd Nord" who wishes to "set the recerd strate about the god called Akatosh and the dragon called Alduin. They ent the same thing" because "Imperials are idiutts!" who misunderstand the difference between the dragon-god Akatosh and the dragon Alduin. These books are objects found

²¹ This is the land of the Daedric Prince Hermaeus Mora, sometimes called the Demon of Knowledge. He is the only of the seventeen Daedric lords—powerful magical beings that did not surrender power to create the mortal plane. Hermaeus Mora's own plane is a never-ending library of forbidden knowledge, a maze-like prison of obscure and powerful knowledge under a green pulsing sky. Unlike the other Daedric lords, Hermaeus Mora does not appear humanoid but instead of a dark void from which tentacles and eyes appear and disappear. Hermaeus Mora seems to take inspiration from Lovecraftian and eldritch knowledge traditions, themed around knowledge that the human mind cannot bear to understand.

within the spaces of the game at random, and they each form a different voice within the larger languages of Skyrim's spaces. These inserted textual objects act as actionable indices that direct the player's attention to various moments of time and different areas of Skyrim and the world surrounding it, as well. Some of these voices, such as Thomgar Iron-Head's account, are deliberately humorous, but even in such a short and frankly silly example, we can see the development of stereotypes, ideologies, and tensions through which the chronotope of domination speaks. Thomgar Iron-Head's purposefully mangled spelling and self-declaration of being a "prowd Nord" sets the expectation that Nords are brutish, uneducated and argumentative while also thinking of themselves as superior to Imperials²².

Of the 820 books in *Skyrim*, over 300 of them are considered historical or lore books. A small collection of these books act as guides to the major cities of Skyrim. They detail history and point out major areas of interest to the players. The books focused on the city of Markarth, though, paint a very different picture from other cities; they detail a bloody civil war of colonization and elimination, setting up a region marked by constant battles with a people called the Forsworn, a racially Othered group, orienting the player to view the conflicts of the area as a battle between terrorists and ordinary folks. But it is not just through inserted textuality that players are oriented to view the Forsworn in this way. Another example of a large-scale time-space dialog that is impacted by inserted textual orientation can be found in the visual rhetoric of Skyrim's architecture.

A Language of Time and Space: Architecture

²² Imperial is both a race and a faction in the Civil War questline.

Buildings and architecture make for a powerful visual language to explore when we consider chronotopes because, as Bakhtin notes, "space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history" (1981, 83). Buildings and places carry messages within their physical arrangement within the game over time. In referring to non-digital narrative architecture—the narrative structures of physical places and buildings—Sophia Psarra writes that “Architecture carries content through the arrangement of spaces, materials, social relationships and the cultural purposes with which it is invested. It is underpinned by agencies and the systems of thought that are involved in its production” (1-2). Building on Henri Lefèbvre and Bill Hillier, Psarra defines space “as a set of social relations” (2009, 221) and specifically focuses on the ideological and physical constructions of buildings, which are “grasped as manipulations of space and form, implying a cognitive link between architecture, the designer and the viewer” (Psarra 2009, 4). Setha Low refers to this approach as the practice of “spatializing,” which she defines as “to produce and locate – physically, historically, affectively and discursively – social relations, institutions, representations and practices in space” (2017, 7). Building on Psarra and Low’s exploration of narrative architectures in physical spaces, we may examine digital spaces in a similar way. This allows us the opportunity to understand new layers of narrative structure and player experience within game spaces. Yet as buildings are also representative of social relationships, there is a dialogue of temporality created by the buildings as well.

As discussed in the forthcoming chapters focusing on time and space respectively, through the acts of navigating and exploring space, the stories of Skyrim become less about the plotted narrative’s focus on the “saving the world” trope and instead engage players in an intricate tangle of problems formed through hegemonic powers and colonization. In particular, when we read the architectural narratives of Skyrim’s capital cities, we can see distinct rhetorical messages taking shape

that serve to remold large-scale story beats within the game’s narrative, such as we see in the western-most city of Skyrim, Markarth, which serves as a key representation of colonial development throughout the province.

As a place, Skyrim is full of traces and cues for interaction and interpretation. Its environment engages players in a series of indexical clues to be found and activated into small chains of causal logic, with occasional pieces of catalysts made visible within the visual representations in the game. Sun-ha Hong describes Skyrim as “approximately 16 square miles of high fantasy landmass to explore” (2014, 42). Particularly noting the attention to environmental fullness within the game, he notes that “This landscape is populated with flora and fauna; homesteads are filled with domestic paraphernalia; and the world is subject to weather patterns, day–night cycles, and its own lunar system” (2014, 42). Wilderness and natural spaces dominate the majority of spaces in the game, in contrast to the small towns, villages, or cities. Following in the postmodern understanding of hodge-podge Nordicisms, the people of Skyrim both relish the challenge of their lives as well as fight to conquer the land and its spaces. The spaces that Nords and other Empire citizens refer to as civilization and the wild, untamed spaces of nature are separated and made binary, or in the words of Val Plumwood, dualisms. She argues that:

To be defined as “nature” in this context is to be defined as passive, as non-agent and non-subject, as the “environment” or invisible background conditions against which the “foreground” achievements of reason or culture (provided typically by the white, western, male expert or entrepreneur) take place [. . .] It means being seen as part of a sharply separate, even alien lower realm, whose domination is simply “natural,” flowing from nature itself and the nature(s) of things. (Plumwood 1993, 4)

Although not part of the more “cosmopolitan” areas of the Empire, Skyrim’s harsh nature is certainly space for the Empire’s colonization and exploitation, but in many regards, that does not make the rebelling Nords any different than the Empire they hate. The spaces controlled and separated from

wilderness in Skyrim are telling examples of spatial storytelling in the game. Skyrim's small towns are intended to resemble actual ancient Norse villages, with buildings made of stone and wood with straw roofs, places made tame and livable for the "civilized" Nord, as opposed to the beasts of the wilderness—although these beasts include other people, including Orc, Breton, and Khajiit communities, as well as lawless bandits (usually Nord).

The cities of Skyrim, however, reflect very different influences and forms of architectural narrative and environmental storytelling in conversation with the Nordic/Viking setting. Architectural narrative refers to the stories structured by the design of architecture and buildings within environments, as well as players' experiences of those architectures. When playing in the architecturally designed cities and spaces, players will find that the architecture itself speaks to ideologically colonial, racist, and white supremacist ideals while at the same time, fails in its attempt to critique them. For example, in Whiterun, appeals to Nordic neomedievalism inadvertently uphold the status-quo of white supremacy. Yet in the civil war plotline of *Skyrim*, Whiterun is functionally destroyed because of the player's choices and consequently to an unbending insistence on political neutrality. On the other hand, within the city of Markarth, players descend, layer by layer, through the history of the city's colonialism and to its foundations in slavery and ethnic cleansing.

This conception of narrative architecture then does not limit discussion to buildings, although it does not disallow such discussions, either, as "buildings are grasped as manipulations of space and form, implying a cognitive link between architecture, the designer and the viewer" (Psarra 2009, 4). Whiterun is the first city (rather than town) that players are likely to encounter, as two of the earliest quests, "Bleak Falls Barrow" and "Dragon Rising" both point the player towards Whiterun during a moment of the game where there is little other quest-focused direction. Players can, of course, just wander in any direction and not pay any mind to the quests. However, the player is also spatially and

environmentally²³ pointed towards Whiterun. Centrally located in Skyrim, surrounded by flat, treeless plains, Whiterun is the only hold in Skyrim which does not border either the ocean or a foreign province—its heartland. All Whiterun’s borders are with other holds in Skyrim, making it a prime location for trading, but also, for military strategy.

Whiterun serves as a neutral ground in many ways. Its buildings serve as a point of comparison against other holds in the province; many buildings throughout Skyrim’s smaller towns are constructed of staves—in particular, a pine-shade of vertical wooden boards. But mostly notably, Dragonsreach in Whiterun appears to be modeled after a traditional Norwegian stave church, sharing a particular resemblance to the Borgund Stave church in Norway. Sharing features such as the familiar wooden staves, “cube within a cube” structure (Nikel) that stacks the multiple stories of the building without resting them directly one atop the other, as we see in modern architecture. Rather, parts of the third story seem to emerge from halfway through the second, creating tiered angular roofing over ambulatory walkways, several of which are technically more like porches, open to the elements on the side. Additional similarities include x-shaped scissor beams that support the ceiling, intricately carved wooden pillars, x-shaped wooden trusses visible on interior walls, a single high tower over the top of the building, and carved dragon figures on the roof (“Borgund Stave Church” 2016).

²³ After the tutorial levels, the player walks with an NPC they met during the disaster at Helgen, who leads them down a small hilly path to the small town of Riverwood. The town itself, predictably on a river, is nestled in a small valley; to the north is an enormous ancient tomb—the aforementioned Bleak Falls Barrow—and to the east, a road through the woods. To the south is part of the valley wall, and west, there are no discernable trails or paths, just trees. Following the road to the east brings players along a path that splits into a north-eastern route up the valley wall to the Barrow, and to the north-west, a small hill downwards towards a large, flat plain. The city of Whiterun is one of the only features in the distance. Positioned on what looks like the only hill in the predominantly tundra terrain, Whiterun is visually situated to pique interest, the hold’s keep of Dragonreach visible from across the plain



(Fig 4.1) A photograph of the Borgund Stave church in Norway. (“Borgund Stave Church Exterior” 2016)



(Fig 4.2) A photograph of the interior of the Borgund Stave Church in Norway (“Borgund Stave Church Interior” 2016).

Overall, this style of building is known for its mixture of Christian and Viking symbols, making it fit smoothly into the neomedieval setting of the game. However, the fact that this setting mimics a real-world setting continues to complicate the already complex neomedieval dialogues present in *Skyrim*. It is not just the keep that is styled and constructed in this manner, however. Many of the houses and shops share the same visible x-shaped wooden trusses and steeply pitched roofs, and some even share the carved dragon statues on the roof as well. Many smaller towns throughout the rest of the province of *Skyrim* share the same wooden staves and x-shaped trusses, although in smaller settlements, roofs tend to be thatched straw rather than tiled, symbolizing the relative wealth of those living inside the city’s walls and decorating the structures with neomedieval atmosphere.



(Fig. 4.3) A screenshot of the Dragonsreach Hold in Whiterun, Skyrim (“Dragonsreach” 2014).

Yet Whiterun’s neutrality—in the war (again, as discussed in Chapter 5) and as a base of comparison architecturally—complicates and enriches the readings of other cities within Skyrim. In particular, the city of Markarth reveals layers of conflict within the history of the city’s colonialism and the specific ways these spaces are built and what social relationships they manage and control, especially considering the ways that the game’s inserted textuality has oriented the player to understand and interpret the space. To borrow from Psarra again, the ways that buildings are visually and spatially designed carries the social and cultural underpinning of narrative throughout different spaces. To build a space is to build a story of the spaces’ culture of use, culture in this case referring to, as Low puts it, the “multiple and contingent forms of knowledge, power and symbolism that comprise human and nonhuman interactions; material and technological processes; and cognitive processes, including thoughts, beliefs, imaginings and perceptions” (2017, 7). To explore the ways

that in exploring the specific ways these spaces are built and what social relationships they manage and control, we can see additional layers of narrative structure within the game which are otherwise hidden in plain sight.

Reaching to the West: Markarth's Spaces over Time

The environment of the Reach is visually distinct from the rest of Skyrim. While other areas of Skyrim are certainly rocky or mountainous, the Reach is strikingly different. The entire province is a valley wedged between two mountain ranges, the bottom of this valley a grey stone with little plant life. The plants that the Dragonborn can find here are scrubby and greyed. Gone are the green fields of Whiterun, the temperate forests of Falkreath, the rocky coasts of Haafingar, or even the swamps of Hjaalmarch. The most common plant in the region is the juniper, a scraggly small tree with light grey-green berries. A dismal fog hangs over the lowest parts of the valley. The Karth river, as opposed to other rivers, lakes, and ponds in Skyrim, is a murkier brown broken up by whitewater rapids, sudden drops, and twists. There are few pathways in the region and most follow the river, making exploring the region difficult on foot. The Reach is immediately unwelcoming, just from the environment's visuals and the inaccessibility of the space itself—difficult to enter, difficult to explore, constrained by its own physicalities.

Markarth is literally carved into a mountain, with its homes, shops, and other buildings partially buried in the mountain's stone, with doors constructed from a strange bronze colored metal, unused anywhere else in Skyrim. Similarly, steam pipes—unheard of in a medieval town and unused anywhere else in the game—made of the same gold-bronze metal, wind through buildings and homes. The in-game book, *A Sell-Sword's Guide to Markarth*, reads, "First thing you'll notice in the City of Stone is... the stone. They say dwarves cut out the city from the mountain, and maybe they did by the

look of it. But what it really means is that the whole place is vertical, and the streets are really cliffs.²⁴” Instead of the more open environment in most cities in Skyrim, Markarth is a city of stratifying highs and lows. The wealthiest residences, temples, and the Keep where the Jarl lives are higher up than the mill, mines, and worker’s group housing, which are at the very bottom. The hierarchical positioning of actual buildings in Markarth is not a subtle indication of social class. It is in fact dizzyingly obvious, and there is a very long way to fall, socially and physically. And already this early in considering the spatialization of this space, we see mentions of “the dwarves,” also known as the Deep Elves or Dwemer, which I will fully discuss later in this chapter.

Meanwhile, an examination of the city’s layout and architecture through a spatialization lens brings class tensions to the forefront. The ways that buildings are arranged in current day Markarth are predictable in terms of class, even blatant. Waterfalls stream between rocky spires, dividing the city into a central spire surrounded by water. On the top of this central spire is the highest building in the city—a temple to one of the approved gods in the ruling Empire. The most protected building is the capitol building, Understone Keep, which houses government and military leaders, which is behind the central spire and opposite the only city gate. But it is not just carved out of the mountain’s side like the rest of the city, but into it—hence the name Understone. The most visible—permissible religion—and the most protected—government and military—are valued higher than other objects, ideologies, and people in the area. Löw reminds us that spaces are:

. . . relational arrangements of living beings and social goods. This underlines . . . the simultaneous practice of placing (groups of) humans and things and the need to link together objects perceived/seen to form spaces. The synthesizing activity required here points towards the possible existence of highly diverse culture-, gender- or class-specific exclusion, and thus at the same time to the possibility of spatial relevance

²⁴ The casual tone mimics the kind of speaking one might hear shared between mercenaries, but to have it recorded and circulated around Skyrim in a book format indicates a larger audience of writing and reading people than real medieval settings would have.

systems. The practice of placing, in turn, itself opens our eyes to hierarchic orderings and social structurings (Löw 120).

The middle sections of the city are merchant housing, titled private residences, and trade hubs such as stores, stalls, and the market. The inn, often viewed as a kind of “heart” of a city or town in fantasy adventures, is centralized under the temple. Across one of the rivers from this middle section is a manufacturing area, dominated by blacksmithing and additional shops dedicated to the creation of goods. But below that, damp and under the rivers, are very visible stockades and just next to the stocks is an area called the warrens—communal housing for manual laborers and the otherwise homeless. Filthy, disease-ridden and well, damp. The city’s only internal guard tower is, of course, just above the stockades and warrens, looking down into the lowest parts of the city. So, a cross section of Markarth would look like this:

- Religion
- Governance
- Upper class housing (Nords)
- Military
- Middle class housing (Nords)
- Trade
- Manufacturing
- Working class housing (Breton/ “Reachmen”)
- Prisoners/Slaves (Breton/Forsworn)

It’s not even subtle; the ruling class is literally built on top of the middle class, and the middle class is built on top of the working class and mobilized to continue bearing down on the working class. This, while interesting, is not shocking. But this architecture also implies a distinctly modernized society. There are no peasants/nobles binaries, but instead, an upper-, middle-, and working-class society. And lower down, beneath the visible prisons, is another prison where inmates are forced into mining labor, although its presence and use of convict labor is well-known within the city.

There is no guidance point to direct a player to Markarth at any moment in the story, unlike events ushering the player into Whiterun early on. A player can reach this part of Skyrim with any number of motives. Nyx the wood-elf Dragonborn encountered Markarth completely on accident following the events of a questline that mimics the overarching plot of the movie *The Hangover*; after blacking out during a drinking contest, Nyx awoke on the other side of Skyrim in a temple, being yelled at by priestesses who grudgingly send the Dragonborn on a quest to retrace their drunken steps, including an accidental marriage to a hagraven. Other players may encounter Markarth by paying for a carriage ride and fast traveling to the city. Some players will simply wander to the town while exploring. And as discussed, many will learn of Markarth through inserted textual materials. The paratextual pamphlet “Pocket Guide to the Empire, 1st Edition” notes that the Reach is “by far the most cosmopolitan of the Holds of Skyrim, Nords of the pure blood holding only the barest majority according to the recent Imperial Census” (“Pocket Guide,” *Elder Scrolls: Redguard*)²⁵. While the word choice of “cosmopolitan” might read as a positive to us, the context clearly implies distaste for this “multi-cultural” area of Skyrim. It is of note that the events of *ES5* take place in 4E 201, 600 years after “Pocket Guide to the Empire, 1st Edition” is written. In those 600 or so years²⁶, a lot happens in the Reach, however, the end result by the time the Dragonborn visits the area is much as

²⁵ An illustrated guidebook detailing the provinces under imperial control during the game year 864 during the Second Empire. It was included as a paper-bound booklet in the 1998 *Elder Scrolls: Redguard*.

²⁶ Time in the *Elder Scrolls* series is marked with the empire's number and a number of years since that empire's beginning—i.e., the date of publication for “Pocket Guide to the Empire, 1st Edition” would be written 2E 864, meaning it was published during the 864 years into the Second Empire. Spoken out loud, this would read as “864 Second Era.” The events of *Skyrim* take place in 4E 201, 600 years after “Pocket Guide to the Empire, 1st Edition” is written.

described in the “Pocket Guide” —Nord people are just barely the racial majority of the area, although they do hold all positions of power of the hold.

The player enters the world of Skyrim during a civil war between the Nords and the ruling Empire, but here in the western most part of Skyrim, an additional civil war is occurring. This area of the game is divided between two groups of people: the racial majority of Nords, and settlers from the nearby province called Bretons. By talking to the inhabitants of the Reach, the player learns that this area of Tamriel has been contested territory between two neomedievalist provinces for ages, with both Skyrim’s colonizing Vikings and the neighboring settler nation of High Rock, now home to the court-intrigue and magically-inclined Bretons, fighting for control of the craggy land—which was originally the homeland of the Orcs, long-ago scattered to isolated villages or to a centralized Orcish city-state in High Rock. In Skyrim, Orcs live in isolated tribal communities called Strongholds scattered throughout the land, and it is only on their Strongholds that Orcs are permitted to live traditionally only on small portions of land left to them by the various Holds. But control of the Reach—a natural border mountain range—has changed hands many times.

The city of Markarth is the seat of both Imperial and Nord power in the region, and both conquering peoples write the history of the region. Most books, notes, and even conversations about Markarth and the Reach explain that the area was overrun by terrorists known as the Forsworn. The Dragonborn will encounter many of the Forsworn, who are othured in a number of ways. The in-game book, “The Holds of Skyrim,” warns Imperial travelers to “Be aware that this dangerous region of Skyrim is home to the Forsworn, the rebellious natives of the Reach. They know the terrain, can strike without warning, and count the Empire as an enemy. If they attack, you must neither give nor expect any mercy” (*Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*). In referring to the native people of the area as “rebellious,” the prevailing attitude towards the Forsworn is revealed; to the Nord and Imperial

people, the Forsworn are simply thugs to be put down, a rebellion to quell. Despite the fact that the Forsworn are not the native people of the land, the erasure of the Orcish history of the land is more or less complete. It takes an interested player who is willing to dig deep into Tamriel's history in the game and outside the game, in order to recover this information. The displacement and abuse of the Forsworn in the area, too, is overwritten through propaganda-like language choices in books, which juxtapose the witnessed behaviors of the Forsworn and the historical background surrounding them.

When the borders between provinces were settled following a long-standing war, a very large population of Breton people suddenly found themselves citizens of Skyrim rather than the neighboring province of High Rock. The conquering Nords of the area were not kind to the less-wealthy Bretons, who were treated as second-class citizens in their new home—possessions and land taken, families separated, and ways of life disrupted and destroyed. The Bretons took up the name Reachmen to rise against the ruling Empire and overthrow the ruling class of Nords. They were successful and for two years, held an independent kingdom. But of course, it was then reclaimed and repopulated with a ruling majority of Nords again and brought back into Skyrim. Reachmen were captured or forced from the city. The ones who escaped formed small camps throughout the Reach, uniting under a new name: the Forsworn.

While all this information is only available to the player through inserted texts, like journals and books, in addition to paratexts outside the game, such as the earlier mentioned “Pocket Guide to the Empire” or fan wikis, the player encounters and must contend with the aftermath of these events. During the Skyrim Civil War, Markarth is engaged not just in supporting the Stormcloaks, but in fighting off Forsworn attacks. The Forsworn are deeply outmatched, however. The leader of the Forsworn is captured before the Dragonborn comes to Markarth and forced into labor underneath the city. While there are more surface level mines that Bretons/Reachmen, poor Nords, and

systematically Otherved races work at, the deeper level mines are punishment for the Forsworn who are captured; they are enslaved to economically aid their enemies, or else their families face retaliation.

The shift from "Reachmen" to "Forsworn" marks a large shift in their portrayal. They go from being an oppressed people to inhuman terrorists, beyond reason or logic. This is a typical step in colonial violence. But as Low notes:

The impact of competing claims to space and place and the ensuing territorial and cultural conflicts are transforming social relations among ethnic and religious groups, social classes, regions, states and neighborhoods. Contemporary world problems such as human-made disasters, civil wars, terrorist attacks, climate change and other environmental concerns are inextricable from the material, symbolic and ideological aspects of space and place. (1).

We see no difference here; the city tells the same story of colonization. Everything that is clearly relayed to the player through the narrative architecture of the city and in-game objects and people, is a duplication of Markarth's past.

This civil war narrative frames the Forsworn as sympathetic, but it is also complicated by the ways the player encounters the Forsworn. The player often battles members of the Forsworn, as the group is hostile to any stranger in the Reach, and the Dragonborn is no exception. Meanwhile, the in-game books provide an especially focused exposition of these skirmishes in the Reach. The Dragonborn may encounter the in-game book, "The 'Mad Men' of the Reach," which argues a more sympathetic view of the Forsworn:

Since the legendary victory . . . over the "barbarian natives" . . . Imperial and Nord scholarship has cast the people of the Reach as little more than savages, prone to irrational fits of violence, worshiping old, heretical gods, and fetishizing beasts and nature spirits that any civilized person would best well avoid. In truth, these accounts are little more than "victor's essays," a perspective narrowed by the Empire's constant strife with the ancient, proud people that lived in this land . . . In light of this, I hope

to create a more complete, accurate, and fair assessment of a group that has long suffered under the role of "enemy," "troublemakers," and "them."

The author of “The ‘Mad Men’ of the Reach” is purposely drawing attention to the propaganda language used in descriptions of the Forsworn, by using phrases such as “victor’s essays,” and emphasizing the exclusive language usage, such as “enemy” or “them.” At the same time, the descriptions of Nord and Imperial scholarship—“fits of violence,” “fetishizing beasts and nature spirits,” etc.—are easily established as truth in the experience of the participant. Upon entering any Forsworn controlled area, the Dragonborn comes face to face with grisly battle trophies from men and animals, as well as sacrificially brutal rituals on themselves and others. On one hand, the player reads and understands the existence of the propaganda language, but also comes face to face with a Forsworn removing the still-beating heart from a willing man. The two images clash violently. A later passage in “The ‘Mad Men’ of the Reach,” references a conversation with a Forsworn leader, who states:

You want to know who the Forsworn are? We are the people who must pillage our own land. Burn our own ground. We are the scourge of the Nords. The axe that falls in the dark. The scream before the gods claim your soul. We are the true sons and daughters of the Reach. The spirits and hags have lived here from the beginning, and they are on our side. Go back. Go back and tell your Empire that we will have our own kingdom again. And on that day, we will be the ones burying your dead in a land that is no longer yours.

Another in-game book, “The Bear of Markarth,” suggests the actions of the Forsworn to be fairly justified. “The Forsworn Kingdom was quite peaceful for those two years they were in power,” the book states, while admitting to mild retaliation against Nord landowners who had acted unfairly against Reachmen during the control of the Empire, but “on the whole the Forsworn ruled their lands fairly and were making overtures to be recognized by the Empire as a legitimate kingdom.” However, this all collapsed when the Stormcloak troops battled and took back the hold. “The Bear of Markarth” records the aftermath as “nothing short of war crimes.” Every official who worked for the Forsworn

was put to the sword, even after they had surrendered. Many survivors were tortured to give up names of other Forsworn fighters who had fled the city or were in the hills of the Reach. Anyone who lived in the city, Forsworn and Nord alike, were executed if they had not fought with Ulfric and his men when they breached the gates.

The colonial voice of *Skyrim* is clear; the Forsworn are blood-thirsty and ruthless. The attempts made by the in-game author of “The ‘Mad Men’ of the Reach” to paint the Forsworn in a positive light fails. The language used by the Forsworn leader in this particular passage reeks of propaganda. “The true sons and daughters” is a phrase used by almost all the faction groups of *Skyrim*. In both referenced passages from “The ‘Mad Men’ of the Reach,” special attention should be paid to the use of words such as “them,” “our,” and “yours.” The strong exclusive language used by both sides, not just the Empire, suggests the Forsaken have adopted this brutal image as a method of psychological warfare against the Empire.

The use of the ultimatum is the unfortunate and blunt essence of all the “us/them” language portrayed in the game. The continuation of the propaganda language used by both sides is deeply rooted in the conflicts set up by the developers. The player must navigate these conflicts within the space of the game by making a choice: who is “us” in the case of the Dragonborn? The Empire? The Forsaken? The Stormcloaks? The option for the player to side with the Forsworn briefly, although it is only a temporary agreement, and the player is still attacked by the roving bands of Forsworn throughout the Reach.

These representational elements frame the Nords as white colonizers, a stand-in for Viking settlers and conquerors of space. The Bretons, as the only mixed-race playable race in the game²⁷, act as a displaced population being oppressed by a white majority. Bretons are biologically and culturally Othered in this way, and most Bretons feature darker skin, more slender features, and stronger magical abilities than Nords. Keeping in mind that magical ability is culturally looked down upon in Nord culture, the less wealthy, culturally shunned, mixed-raced Breton population becomes racialized against the whiteness of the Nords. This is further emphasized when Bretons make the visual shift from Breton/Reachmen to Forsworn; they go from wearing the white medieval European-styled tunics and pants to wearing animal skins, skulls, feathers, and Forsworn women's hair becomes partially styled as dreadlocks²⁸, we have a frankly offensive image of Indigenous and Black stereotypes. And the oppression of nonwhite peoples under white supremacy then becomes a crucial part of the story of the Reach.

²⁷ Bretons have elven and human ancestry, making them nonwhite in terms of the game's race representation.

²⁸ The Dragonborn can take and wear Forsworn armor. The hairstyle is part of the helmet, so female Dragonborn all become stylized like this when wearing Forsworn armor.



(Fig 4.4) Eltrys, a Reachmen character wearing a tunic. (Elder Scrolls Wiki 2016)



(Fig 4.5) Two Forsworn characters in animal skins. (Elder Scrolls Wiki 2012).

There is a glimmer of resistance, a break from the dominating voices of white supremacy, within the questlines “The Forsworn Conspiracy” and “No One Escapes the Cidhna Mine.” Following a chain of quests that begin when the player first enters Markarth—the attempted murder of an Imperial spy by a Forsworn agent—leads the player into a situation where the city guards frame the player for a murder they themselves committed. Having consistently warned the player to mind their own business, the guards imprison the player within the Cidhna mines, where they meet the Forsworn leader, Madanach, who has been imprisoned but still able to control a small portion of the Forsworn near the city. In order to escape the mines, the player has the option to kill Madanach or join with him and his forces and break out of the prison together. Should the player choose this option, the Dragonborn gains an alliance with a single Forsworn camp not far from the city. During these two quests, the player learns much about the abuses of the ruling Nords against the Breton survivors of the Stormcloak takeover of Markarth prior to the events of *Skyrim*, as well as learn the reasons behind many of Madanach’s more brutal methods of resistance. However, the additional Forsworn throughout the Reach do not view you as an ally, as they are not interested in Madanach’s attempts to take back Markarth from the Empire or Stormcloaks. Instead, they remain inhumane, inhuman enemies of all. Even as some players seek resistance against the chronotope of domination, the majority of players seem to fall on the side of the Imperials or Nords against the Forsworn.



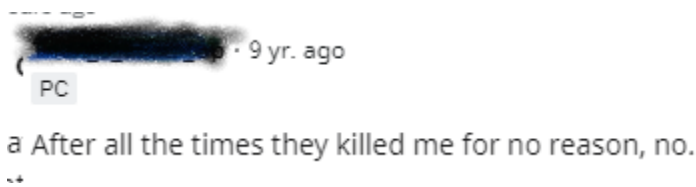
Posted by  9 years ago

12

Ever wish you could join the Forsworn and take back Markarth?



I always thought that this would be an awesome thing to do. To take back the reach as a Forsworn. Anyone else thought about this?



(Fig 4.6) A Reddit thread on the Forsworn. (“R/Skyrim - Ever Wish” 2012).

Indeed, these competing cultures—the Imperials, the Nords, and the Forsworn—all attempt to dominate the spaces of Markarth, and by extension, the rest of the Reach. But this historical in-game context is complex and difficult to find pieces of directly in the spaces of *Skyrim*. However, the space of the city itself and its architecture and social spaces hints to the tumultuous violence of the Reach and suggests the violence reaches even further than the already complicated surface.

The City Below

As mentioned in *A Sell-Sword's Guide to Markarth*, there are several visual indications that this city is not like any other in *Skyrim*. Dwarves, also called Dwemer or Deep Elves, are well-known figures of mystery to the inhabitants of the province. Markarth is the visible remains of an ancient Dwemer city, a species of elves thought to be extinct for thousands of years. The strange golden-bronze metal work found throughout Markarth is residue from the building technologies of the Dwemer, as are the steam pipes and carvings depicting facial representations, unseen in clear detail by any other culture in *Skyrim*. Not much is known about the Dwemer before the player begins their journey through *Skyrim*, but an effect of several plot sequences in the game is the illumination of the past of this lost race, one that had remained hidden deep underground. For example, when the player enters Understone Keep, the government center of Markarth, they will find a Dwemer museum set up near an entrance to Dwemer ruins under the keep. The player is instructed to enter the ruins and extract artifacts from the ruins for the purposes of being displayed. But previously, the player likely

encountered areas of ruins filled with the strange golden-bronze metal and steam-powered mechanical beings.

Earlier in this chapter, I established the hierarchy of Markarth, as exemplified by its architecture. But it becomes more than just this cross-section:

- Religion
- Governance
- Military
- Trade
- Industry
- Working class

It becomes something more like this:

- Nords
- Bretons
- Dwemer
- Falmer

The violence in Markarth is a reflection of the space's colonial past, well before the Nord settlers. There's an entire additional city and civilization that comes into play underneath Markarth. Dwarves, also called Dwemer or Deep Elves, are well-known figures of mystery to the inhabitants of the province. Even if they had not encountered other Dwemer ruins before, several NPCs point out the ruins beneath the city; a few quests in the Jarl's keep even require the player to enter the ruins for themselves.

However, it is important to understand that the Dwemer, also known as Deep Elves, are not framed as the victims of colonization. The Dwemer are commonly viewed as an advanced and mysterious lost civilization, more along the lines of Atlantis myths. The player is very aware of the Dwemer, as there are many ruins bearing the tell-tale visuals of the long-ago elves. The history of the Dwemer builds on the player's perceptions of the current conflicts in Markarth to reveal a different

kind of erasure and colonial violence. While the Dragonborn certainly sees a great deal of Dwemer architecture and artifacts, they also encounter an entire race of beings living among the ruins. Not of the Dwemer or even ancestors of the Dwemer, but the remains of the fabled enemy of the Nords, the Snow Elves.

Snow Elves (also known as Falmer²⁹), inhabit these underground zones. Vicious, spindly creatures who cannot communicate with the player and attack the Dragonborn indiscriminately. But the Snow Elves were not always like these creatures. A precious few books and ancient journals record the history of Nords and the Snow Elves and discuss the events that led to the fall of the Snow Elf empire. Originally the conquerors of the region, the Snow Elves were the group of elves that warred against the early Nords, not the ancestors of the current-day High Elves or Wood Elves. The Snow Elves and Nords war for the lands of Skyrim was disastrous for the Elves. The result was nothing short of genocide, with Nord soldiers chasing down and killing Snow Elves en masse. The in-game book, “The Falmer: A Study,” states that after the leader of the Snow Elves, The Snow Prince, was finally bested in battle by the Nords, who bury the Snow Prince “with honor” and set out to kill every remaining Snow Elf. Those who could not flee were slaughtered, and the rest went into hiding. The “Diary of Faire Agarwen,” written by a young surviving soldier, describes life in hiding, painting an image of life running from genocide:

It feels like years since we were forced into hiding. I dare not write where we stay for fear of endangering the good people of this house should this diary be discovered. . .

²⁹ In the same way that High Elves are called Altmer, Wood Elves are called Bosmer, the Dark Elves are called Dunmer, the Deep Elves are called Dwemer, the Snow Elves were also called Falmer—“mer” meaning elf and the various prefixes accordingly. Historically, they preferred the name “Snow Elves” although they were called “Falmer” by other elves. Later, the word “Falmer” was appropriated to refer only to the transformed race by Nords and others when describing them as monsters to be killed.

We were separated from many of our kin along the road when it became increasingly difficult to travel discreetly in our numbers. We were forced to go our separate ways and travel only at night. I have heard no news of where the others may have gone and fear I never shall. Our lives are forever changed.

The few groups of living Snow Elf leaders negotiated with their distant kin, the Deep Elves, for sanctuary. The limited remaining Snow Elves escaped to the underground kingdom below Skyrim, where an equally gruesome fate awaited them. The Dwemer enslaved the remaining Snow Elves and forced the entire population through eugenic manipulation to destroy their culture, language, physicality, and more. “The Falmer: A Study” explains that:

[T]hese Dwemer did not trust their snow elf guests and forced them to consume the toxic fungi that once grew deep underground. As a result, the snow elves were rendered blind.

Soon, the majestic snow elves were rendered powerless. They became the dwarves' servants... and then their slaves. But the Dwemer's treachery was so deep, so complete, that they made the fungi an essential part of the Falmer's diet. This guaranteed the weakness of not only their current Falmer thralls, but their offspring as well. The snow elves, for time eternal, would be blind.

But as is always the story with slaves and their masters, the Falmer eventually rebelled. Generations after they first sought solace among the dwarves, and experienced bitter betrayal, the Falmer rose up against their oppressors. The [sic] overthrew the dwarves and fled even further down.

The book continues, describing the brutal civil war between the Falmer and the Dwemer, ending upon the disappearance of the Dwemer, although it seems that the Falmer were not the cause of the disappearance. And it is these people, the victims of eugenic genocide and enslavement, who the Dragonborn encounters in the ruins beneath Markarth. But the game does not orient us to see victims; the player encounters monsters. The entire “civilization” of the Snow Elves is lost, replaced with something else. The very “humanity” of the Falmer seems to be “lost,” as they viciously attack the player at every given chance, mechanically acting no different than any other hostile creature in the game.

This is another instance of the Othered in *Skryim*, both in the experience and the orientation of the player's narration.³⁰ As Ahmed reminds us, "When we are orientated, we might not even notice that we are orientated: we might not even think 'to think' about this point" (2006, 5). It is unlikely, even if the player is familiar with the history of the Snow Elves and their treatment at the hands of the Dwemer, that a player would consider anything but killing the Falmer on sight. While the Forsaken are Othered, they are not reduced to monsters. They are not dehumanized in the same way; the Dragonborn is given several short opportunities to align themselves temporarily with the Forsaken and may even be allowed access to one of the main Forsaken camps (although any other Forsaken member will attack them).

But there are no such opportunities for the Falmer. The game gives a player very little choice in how to treat the Falmer. There are too many of them living in the ruins for the player to sneak by without a fight and several key items can only be accessed by killing them. The Dragonborn cannot speak with them or understand them; they are treated as hostile animals, nothing more. "The Falmer: A Study" continues, arguing that the "years of fighting the dwarves had left them bloodthirsty and brutal. Feeling the need to conquer, to kill, they began mounting raids to the surface world," justifying the current-day treatment of the people. There is no sympathy for the Falmer in the game's mechanics and very little in their narration that allows an alternate voice to speak of the tragedies and war crimes levied against them. The only narration Falmer have to give them sympathy are two books and some spoken words at the end of a long questline which is part of extra, purchasable content and not the main game. The Forsaken are given voice in *Skryim*, but the Falmer are silenced, marked as

³⁰ The ending of a long, complicated questline has the Dragonborn encounter the two last remaining Snow Elves, deep inside a hidden grove holy to the Snow Elves. One is friendly to the player and supplies a quest to kill his brother, the only other living Snow Elf because his brother has become a vampire and therefore, cannot uphold their holy task of guarding the temple for all their lives.

monsters and hunted. The Forsaken are, after all, humans fighting for their freedom—more ideologically in-line with a white supremacist worldview than non-human and former enemy of the Nords. The Falmer, despite their pale skin, are not marked as white in the same way as the Nords. Whiteness is more than a skin color—it is a fluid construction of power. As André Brock writes of race in video games:

Whiteness is powerfully representational because of its fluidity and contingency. The fluidity of Whiteness is possible precisely because it locks non-Whites into essential concepts of physical and cultural difference—inescapably tied to moral and ethical values that bracket the morals and values of “civilization” *qua* Whiteness. (2011, 431).

Whiteness changes its shape to exclude populations that might be considered white based on light skin tones—in the same ways that Irish, Jewish, Italian, and Polish immigrants to America were not included in white culture in the early twentieth century. To exist outside of the white standard is to be racialized. This means that skin color may be a clear visual marker of whiteness, but whiteness does not include all light skin (but it certainly excludes non-white skin.) In white supremacy, whiteness becomes the norm which excludes Others, re-perpetuating the normalization and orientation of Othering and therefore, of white supremacy. Discussions of whiteness are couched as discussions of people in general and “at the level of racial representation . . . whites are not of a certain race, they’re just the human race” (Dyer 2016, 11). In real-life, white supremacy measures the world in terms of white and not-white. In *Skyrim*, there are Nords and not-Nords. As Dyer writes, “For those in power in the West, as long as whiteness is felt to be the human condition, then it alone both defines normality and fully inhabits it” (2011, 12). White supremacy isn’t just the fault of nationalists and hateful people; white supremacy is the default way that whiteness has shaped the world. We see this reflected in *Skyrim*, as the Nords are the center of “normality” in *Skyrim*, in addition to being

quintessentially appealing to white supremacist ideals via their imagery. Falmer, by definition, cannot be.

Conclusion

The Dwemer disappeared at some point in history. But the Snow Elves carried on underground, now known as Falmer. And it is these people, the victims of eugenic genocide and enslavement, who the Dragonborn encounters in the ruins beneath Markarth. However, the player does not encounter sympathetic victims in need of aid. Instead, the player encounters gaunt and corpse-like beings, long-limbed, eyeless and nose-less with flawed hands and shriveled pointed ears. The entire species is now blind with sallow skin painfully sensitive to light. Beneath the ruins of the Dwemer, they have created their own forms of culture as Falmer, with their own new ideologies, language, tools, and you guessed it—stylization of architecture. But they are no longer people; they are now merely another set of monsters for the Dragonborn to kill. There are no options to work together with them; only to continue the cycle of violence.

The history of this place is laid bare when players encounter it. They are able to see the cycles of colonial violence in all its stages—destruction of a people, economic exploitation, forced assimilation, the ways that history perpetuates and naturalizes inequality, and the dehumanization of the oppressed people into obscurity. While the histories of Markarth—or any colonized space—are written by the oppressors, the story is still there in the place itself. By exploring this example of narrative architecture, it is possible to see the ideological and representational relationships built right into a place. In the words of Setha Low, spatialization as a lens "illuminates how a space or place comes into existence and opens up questions about the political, economic and historical motives of its planning and development. It emphasizes the material aspects of space and place-making, but also

uncovers the manifest and latent ideologies that underlie this materiality” (34). So, when we as players see this place, when we see Markarth and how it is built on layers upon layers of violence, we have the benefit of retrospect. We have the ability to see the ways the real-world issues harm people all over, every day. And while I don't expect *Skyrim* to be the thing that helps folks understand colonial violence, it is a way to explore the ways that the cycle of colonization impacts people far beyond the immediate moment or "when it happened." It still happens. It repeats. It is more than a historical moment; it is a long-lasting inequality. As Patrick Wolfe famously states, colonization is “a structure, not an event” (2006, 388).

The ways that Markarth is designed helps to build this story, an all-too familiar plot unfortunately. Viewing the relationships and languages of *Skyrim*'s spaces through questions of boundaries, location, movement, and identification allows for a new understanding of narrative space in video games, that highlights the practices and structures that oppose and sustain structures both colonial and heteronormative. The architectures of the cities Whiterun and Markarth form distinct rhetorical messages that serve to shape large-scale story beats within the game's narrative. What *Skyrim*'s citizens refer to as civilization and the wild are made binary against the untamed spaces of nature, or in the words of Val Plumwood, dualisms (1993, 4). Instead, we may also think of these as double-voicedness or resonance. The construction of cities or towns serves as the representation of colonial development throughout the province. The cities of *Skyrim* reflect very different influences and forms of architectural narrative, which is crucial in developing the ways that players are, to borrow from Psarra again, carrying the social and cultural underpinning of narrative throughout spaces. When playing in these cities and spaces, players will find that the architecture itself speaks to ideologically colonial, racist, and white supremacy ideals while at the same time, critiquing them. In Whiterun, appeals to Nordic neomedievalism uphold the status-quo of white supremacy. Yet in the

civil war plotline of *Skyrim*, Whiterun is functionally destroyed as a result of the player's choices and as a consequence of an unbending insistence on political neutrality. Within the city of Markarth, players descend, layer by layer, through the history of the city's colonialism and to its foundations in slavery and ethnic cleansing.

However, *Skyrim* could offer the space for critique of this violence through its narrative architecture. Players can see the cycles of violence and the impacts of colonization and white supremacy. But ultimately, players are unable to enact any resistance. While there is a glimmer of resistance in inserted texts within the game, as well as the "No One Escapes the Cidhna Mine" questline, such resistance is silenced by the dominant languages of the game. The chronotope that arranges spacetime puts domination at the forefront of *Skyrim*, creating antagonist relationships with Others, where violence is the only answer. In exploring the specific ways these spaces are built and what social relationships they manage and control, we can see additional layers of narrative structure within the game which are otherwise hidden in plain sight.

Chapter 5: Space

Introduction

Whether players are avoiding the gravity well in *Spacewar!* (1962) or typing “south” in *Colossal Cave Adventure* (1976), the navigation of represented space within a digital environment dictates play in many video games³¹. Games consist of multiple layers of physical materials and processes, as well as multiple layers of diegetic materials and processes. Not only are the relationships among these layers dialogic, but there are dialogic relationships within these spaces, as well. There are social spaces in videogames. There are fictional spaces in videogames. There are visual spaces, explorable spaces, intertextual spaces, coded spaces, aural spaces, non-narrative spaces, emotional spaces, and play spaces. Games are made of a multitude of spaces, and the relationships within and between these spaces greatly impacts the story of video games. Building on the concepts of navigable space (Manovich 2001; Murray 1997) and environmental storytelling (Pearce 2007; Worch and Smith 2010; Fernández-Vara 2011), I argue that spatial exploration is a key element of many digital games but it is also a deeply subjective process of story-building through dialogic modalities. Games have dialogic relationships within their spaces that players navigate, and in doing so, they craft their own, unique narrative structure and story experience.

I connect story-building processes with the formation of queer space. Jack Halberstam defines “queer space” as “the place-making practices within postmodernism in which queer people engage and it also describes the new understandings of space enabled by the production of queer counterpublics” (2005, 5). In this chapter, I refer to the latter, viewing queerness as an epistemology to see and understand the formation of spaces. While the majority of *Skyrim* players do not identify as

³¹ There are obvious exceptions, such as digital card games or digital slot machine games. But even games such as digital pinball, digital roulette, or digital chess are concerned with the navigation of space.

queer, it is valuable to analyze the spaces of *Skyrim* (the game) through a queer lens to illuminate the stories and dialogic tensions of the game as they conflict with the structure of the place itself, *Skyrim* (the fictional place). I argue that story-building is a type of place-making, and the place-making practices of players shares traits with the formation of queer space-making and queer places. In doing so, I explore the abstract languages of space, such as navigable, interactive, and visual space.

Discussed in detail in this chapter are the manifestations of the Bakhtinian style of “everyday narration” or “*skaz*.” Borrowing from Bakhtin’s novelistic stylistic unities (1981, 262), I “translate” everyday narration into a partnered style within a video game. Video games are, after all, novelistic in the sense that they contain dialogues—the “novel” is a supergenre that expands beyond the paperback novel (Hoy 1992, 765), as discussed in Chapter 2. Through a queer analysis of this style and the languages of space, it becomes clear that the structural spaces of *Skyrim* are in competition with the player’s own place-making narratives. Therefore, this chapter examines the ways that the languages are communicated to the player. The creation and organization of space by players within the game conflicts with normative constructions of space, drawing out a number of complex tensions and meanings that help players to understand the spaces that they are able—or unable—to form.

In the case of *Skyrim*, the stories that players locate within the narrative spaces of the game are less about its plotted focus of the video game trope of “saving the world” than they are about competing structures of political and social power. Players allow the spaces to inspire and direct their attention and focus, forming a series of actions and reactions that players understand as a narrative. Game space inspires narration on the part of the player, who continues to act and react to the directions implied by the space. Because the spaces narrate the stories, the stories created by players of *Skyrim* often diverge from the main questline’s focus on becoming a legendary savior. Instead, the stories inspired by the spaces that players create begins to intersect with the appropriation of cultural,

political, and social spaces within the game. Players encounter numerous spaces connecting to ideological values and cultural symbolism of European and colonial-settler—white—liberation and freedom. In particular, players must grapple with the investment of *Skyrim*'s spaces with ideological values of Viking mythos, Nords as figures of whiteness, and colonial violence.

Navigating Non-binaries

The languages of space, in a Bakhtinian sense, operate on three main levels—call it the grammar of virtual space, if you will. First, spaces are navigable. Second, spaces are visual. Third, spaces are connected to and surrounded by other spaces, making them environmental and contextual.

Some of the foundational discussions of spatial narratives arise from discussions of navigable space in games. Janet Murray and Lev Manovich discuss the concept in their 1997 and 2001 texts, respectively. Murray argues that new media is encyclopedic, participatory, procedural, and spatial (1997). The kind of relationship that users have with space in new media narrative systems is entirely different than what storytelling had seen before, and continuing this line of reasoning in *The Language of New Media*, Manovich explores spatial narrative logic by examining *Myst* (1993) and *Doom* (1993), arguing that navigable space is not simply a different mode of interface for a database, but a new cultural form of narrative due to the fact that the navigation of space changes the mode of narration from a fundamental level (2001, 248). The sheer existence of fictional space that can be accessed seemingly at the players' discretion shifts the focus of a narrator from the author's arrangement of text into something else of the player's own desires and interests.

Skyrim's storytelling logic fits neatly into such early discussions of navigable space in many ways; the player spends much of their time simply existing within the large spaces of the game as

they explore and travel across Skyrim. There are few limitations to space within the world of Skyrim; almost all space in the game is navigable in some way or another, even if it means bending the rules of reality a little bit to do so³².

Stephan Günzel notes there is an important difference between displayed and visual space and navigable space (2008, 175) and that it is necessary to “[distinguish] between the visuality of the presentational space and cardinality of the navigable space” (2008, 177). Areas that are not navigable tend to exist purely to allow the navigable spaces to exist in a 3D plane; visual-only spaces or non-navigable spaces are visual or displayed spaces only, such as the sky, the ceilings of caves, small areas where the Dragonborn’s body would not fit, etc. It’s not necessarily “background” so much as “backdrop,” as the existence of 3D space means that backgrounds are eventually navigable—something I see in the distance, such as a mountain, is eventually navigable once the appropriate amount of space has been traversed. Even something like a wall is an extension of 3D space and is navigable, as a limitation to navigation is fundamental to navigation itself. A wall itself is navigable space; any visual “widow dressings” to the wall are not navigable.

But to understand *Skyrim* both dialogically and queerly, we must expand the ways we talk about navigable space beyond “space that is navigable” and “space that is not navigable.” “Visual space” and “navigable space” are not binary and the boundary between these kinds of spaces is too neat. Non-navigable visual spaces strongly communicate through the same kinds of dialogic interplay as the kinds of spaces that players can mechanically interact with; visual space communicates along the lines of visual rhetoric, so despite being non-navigable, these spaces speak just as strongly as

³² Skyrim is well known for a feature? bug? wherein riding on a horse allows players to climb up nearly any surface. The horse can very nearly take the Dragonborn up a vertical surface. There is never any explanation or commentary on the nature of horses in the game.

navigable spaces, as discussed and illustrated at length in the previous chapter; narrative architecture is partially the narration of non-navigable space.

On the other hand, it is not helpful to turn to the opposite and consider all spaces navigable just because they are visual. Günzel argues that there is a tension between navigable and non-navigable space and that scholars must be aware of these tensions or risk losing some of the symbolic, interactive, or representational elements of spaces. To understand the intersubjective nature of game space and the “multiplicity of standpoints” that spatial narratives entail (2008, 180-82), we need to develop ways to discuss the different kinds of spaces in games and the ways that they are structured. For my objectives, this means finding a non-binary level of navigation is crucial to understanding the queer formation of space in a navigable setting.

Connecting the pieces of spatial “grammar”—navigability, visuality, and interactivity—we can put together the languages of narrative spaces. In game design, this language is often referred to as environmental narrative. This is the dominant conception of spatial narrative in the games industry at the time of writing, and it follows the ideas of environmental storytelling (Worch and Smith 2010) where narrative spaces evoke an implied chain of events to a player within a focused space in a game. A concept introduced by theme park design (Carson 2000; Pearce 2007), “environment” is generally understood to be everything in a game world except for the player themselves. Small-scale locations and short visual narrative cues act to guide a particular kind of identification within that space—identifying the player’s role in the game, the kinds of tasks they will be required to engage in, and what the key pieces of background are within the space. Where film traditionally would include spoken lines of dialogue between characters as a method to fill in background information, games are able to do this in other ways—often through their environments, engaging in visual or navigable dialogism rather than vocal dialogue (as discussed in the previous chapter).

More specifically focusing on space, however, I propose a spectrum of navigations within space, the farthest nodes of this spectrum being what I call free exploration and framed exploration. Free exploration of space allows players the affordance of self-direction within a space, whereas framed exploration narratively directs, limits, or requires particular activities within a space. These kinds of navigations do not operate as a binary, however, as space is not limited to being framed or free—much space operates narratively on both ends or tendrils outwards into other navigable spaces beyond the game’s spectrum of navigation. These navigations are nonbinary in the sense of operating on a spectrum between binaries, but also in the sense of rejecting the entire spectrum and allowing the formation of new spaces entirely. A framed exploration may explode out from itself and into spaces outside the game, as well, such as in Bo Ruberg’s discussion of the politics of passing in *Octodad* (Ruberg 2019, 84-109)³³.

Along this spectrum, I identify two additional kinds of spatial exploration: micro-narratives and fractal-narratives. Closer to framed exploration are micro-narratives. Fernández-Vara defines micro-narratives as “short scripted events that are integrated within the interaction of the player” (2011, 3-4). Such events are uncommon in *Skyrim*, as the number of cinematic moments in the game is extremely limited. Fernández-Vara is not discussing cut-scenes so much as small moments that occur locationally and temporarily for the purpose of framing and shaping the player’s common

³³ The entirety of *Octodad* requires players to achieve checkpoints in a semi-linear fashion before moving to another zone. However, where the exploration of space changes is when we understand the flailing limbs, frustration, and paranoia about being seen as a kind of trans embodiment, as discussed by Ruberg in "Loving Father, Caring Husband, Secret Octopus: Queer Embodiment and Passing in *Octodad*" (Video Games Have Always Been Queer).

narration of the space. For example, when Nyx the wood elf first entered the city of Solitude, I was immediately overwhelmed.

A new, strange city that I have never seen. There is a long lead-up to entering the city proper, moving through docks at the bottom of switchbacks up a steep hill, then a pathway to a city inside a castle-like structure. I eagerly enter, excited to see the Imperial capital. I'm a Stormcloak, sure, but I am interested in seeing "the other side" of this war. Plus, I have quests to do.

When the loading screen clears and I see the city for the first time, I blanch as my ears are filled with the shouting of a crowd and my eyes are met with the sight of a man being led up to a raised stage area with a familiar, horrible object—a chopping block. I had zoned into the city right in the middle of a public execution. I panic; no way no way, this can't be for me! I escaped execution by the Imperials once, and I'm a Stormcloak so maybe it is for me. Nope. Nope! I have no idea what is going on; I immediately zone out of the scene and leave. I can think about this and plan better if I leave the scene and come back to it.

My previous experiences with RPGs suggested to me that this was an event I could return to later. I honestly believed time would pause without my presence.

Rather than blasting my way into the city a few moments later, I more or less emotionally tiptoe my way back in, ready to face the cut-scene. But the execution was over, the crowd dispersed, a body still slumped and kneeling over the chopping block, his head about a foot away. Not a mob after me, then. This empire sure likes beheading people—this is way too much like the intro scene for my tastes. But I missed the cut-scene that would explain what happened and I still have no idea what is going on here. What I do know, as I talk to townsfolk and hear their opinions on the man's death, is that I do not care for this place.

That dislike becomes more than a micro-narrative to me throughout all my hours in *Skyrim*—I had been oriented to view this place with mistrust and fear, and that orientation was amplified by the public execution. It made it all the more easy to sack the city as a Stormcloak soldier later in the game.

These micro-narratives, as defined by Fernández-Vara, are an important way to conceive and conceptualize a number of framed exploration moments where scripted events are combined with some measure of interaction with the player. However, I found some moments of framed narrative in *Skyrim* to operate in a different, but related form, one that is spatially located like a micro-narrative,

but lacking the stability or consistency of the above micro-narratives. I think of these as fractal narratives. To explain, I understand a fractal narrative as being a small, individual piece of a larger web of possible engagements with a space, whereas I understand Fernández-Vara's micro-narratives to look at stable, consistent short, scripted events. Fractal narratives are no less scripted, but the location and timing of these are randomly selected from a database of possible scripted events. This fills the spaces of *Skyrim* with different temporal events. For example, at one point, Nyx was wandering down a snowy mountain pass and came across an NPC. He asked me if I wanted a staff that he had found.

Do I want an item? Of course, I want an item! I accept the man's offer but before I receive the gift, the dialogue option breaks as a snarl hits my ears and the music shifts to a dramatic fight tune. We were under attack! A dragon?! I whirl around, ready to fight back, but all I see is a snow leopard. Whew, I can handle this beast! But the NPC had other plans, it seems—he rushes by me, charging the beast. Why? He's unarmed!

The leopard defeats the NPC in two angry strikes of its paws just before I was able to strike back at the creature. If it had hit me instead, both the NPC and I would have lived. A little guiltily, I bend over to loot the man's remains. He's really not going to need a weapon now, considering he didn't even use the staff he promised me against the snow leopard. But then I noticed something—there was no staff! He didn't have one! And I was promised a staff!

I paused, remembering I had saved the game quite recently after leaving a mountain cave, before walking down this path to the NPC. I'll admit to being a save-scummer when allowed. I reloaded the file.

I reload and Nyx is on top of a snowy pass. If I go down this pass, I'll meet the man with the staff again. But first, I know there's a leopard over here and I'm not going to let it kill the man again. Not far from me off the path, I notice the beast and attack it. Defeating the beast with two arrows, I smugly walk down the path, ready to receive the item from the man. Only he was not there; instead, two nobles on horseback, guarded by two soldiers, dismissively sniffed in my general direction and passed by. Curiously, I reloaded again. I went straight to the same spot and a peddler was there beset by two bandits. I tried to lend a hand against the bandits, but the snow leopard attacked, and all three NPCs and the leopard did not survive the encounter. Oops.

After more than 20 loads and reloads, I still hadn't had a repeated moment in this location, minus the snow leopard. I can conclude that the leopard spawned as soon as I exited the cave and thereby after my save file, hence its presence in all the reloads. But the particular spot next to a road that I was returning to must have been an event-spawn point with a database of potential events to trigger in this location. While these moments are clearly scripted, they are not temporary or locationally locked in the same sense of micro-narratives, which tell a distinct moment of story in a distinct time and space. These fractal-narratives, as I began to think of them, are the structural narrative of what most games simply refer to as "random events." However, they are not random so much as distributed patterns across a wider environmental interactivity space, appearing at different times and places, but locked into their specific patterns. The encounter with the man with the staff could have taken place at any number of these event spawn points, but each of these spawn event points can pull from the same pool of events, producing fractals of narrative, repeating patterns across different scales and locations. In terms of narrative theory, these fractal narratives act as catalyzers, filling in narrative and game space with events that are necessary for the mechanics of the character's skill development, but irrelevant in narrative content. The Dragonborn must engage in the spaces of *Skyrim* to dominate them, but it doesn't matter what exactly they do to engage in these spaces, only that they make use of their skills in order to strengthen them over time.

Both Fernández-Vara's micro-narrations and my own fractal-narrations are possible because of the ability to cross distances combined with the effect of proximal event triggering. The framings of fractal and micro provide a narrative structure to a moment or moments of the world and the player's engagement with it. Micro-narratives tend to be more authoritarian in their narration in *Skyrim*, as the player is very much locked into a specific situation. Each of these narrative moments, these "suddenly"s and random moments within a strange land, are centered in the computational

logics of a video game, although there is still a narrative structure to the random events that occur throughout the Dragonborn's journeys. Indeed, the majority of events that occur throughout the landscapes and wide spaces of wilderness are fractalized in this manner, effectively filling the space with adventures to be had. The chronotope that develops in *Skyrim* organizes a world held in pause during a significant (fictional) historical moment, where temporal events are held in stasis until accessed by the Dragonborn spatially. Once near enough an event spawn point, the world leaps to life, moving forward in its own scene, typically at random, effectively reinforcing the chronotope of domination: there are no events in this world without the Dragonborn's dominating influence.

But in terms of all these kinds of exploration, an awareness of the visual elements of space is crucial. Mary Flanagan points out, "Graphics in three dimensions are read as providing objectivity and omniscience" (2000, 77), so peeling apart this assumed objectivity is crucial to understanding the tensions and languages of spatial narrative logic. Geoffrey Rockwell also points to the importance of what a player can and cannot interact with (2002, 355), and Flanagan emphasizes "context, creation, and representation" of space, asking players to consider what is visible or present in a space, how it can or can't be interacted with, and what the implications of interface and interactivity are within that space (2000, 75). *Skyrim* engages with non-navigable, visual-only space at the same time as other kinds of space—contextual space, interactive space, and the implications of social spaces outside the game itself.

Beyond Navigation: Narration, Facts, and Fiction

While the implications of navigable space were first analyzed in the early 90s, later studies of narrative and navigable space, such as Flanagan's 2000 "Navigating the Narrative in Space: Gender and Spatiality in Virtual Worlds," explore how navigable space acts as a narrative model which

challenges the historic models of narrative structures. To this end, I find Mary Flanagan's theory of navigable narrative (2000, 75) to be deeply useful. Challenges such as Flanagan's, as well as my own, shift our understanding of how spatial narrative logic functions—not through a traditional narrator, but through the player's perception of time, space, and action within a represented environment, the patchwork of smaller experiences and moments performed by the player. These become the everyday narration made by the player to themselves or to others. The player is not, and cannot be, wholly in control of their narration of the game; even the most experienced player is communicating with another system of narration that occurs simultaneously. The player of a story-driven video game takes on the role of a factual agent as well as a fictional one; while the player does not control the fictional narrative, they do arrange their own factual narratives. What I mean by this is that players create both diegetic and nondiegetic narration that overlap and inform each other. They make choices such as dialogue options or spatial navigation, creating a specific, unique style of narration—the factual narration of an entirely fictionalized world with fictionalized affordances. This melding of fictional (and diegetic) action and factual (nondiegetic) narration is what makes game narratives so complex, meaningful, and difficult to study from traditional literary practices—reader response theory can be a useful frame, but it does not contend with the factual narrative elements so much as the interpretive fictional stories derived from fictional narrative structure.

Following Marie-Laure Ryan's definition of narrative as "a mental representation that can be evoked by many media" (2002, 583), we see a different kind of narration evoked by video games, one that is fictional as well as factual. The unstated factual requirements of "I turned left" requires a player to engage with the game's fictional space in a non-fictional way, whether that is pressing A on a keyboard or the left directional button on a controller. To turn left in fiction, the player must act in a way that is factually narratable—"I turned left" in the game is a shorthand for "I supplied the required

input to direct the software to respond to a fictional space.” That is equally part of the narration of a game fiction as any other part within the diegetic space of the game. What makes this narrative fictional is that I am not actually an elf walking around Skyrim. Fictional narration occurs at the level of fiction, i.e., Nitsche’s fictional plane. Factual narration occurs as players engage with gameplay, i.e., Nitsche’s play plane. Both are part of the player’s narration of the game, although the factual narration of play is often not voiced until the player encounters an issue that removes their narrative focus away from the fictional plane with the material technology, with the cognitive processes or physical tasks, like getting stuck on a puzzle, losing a competitive game³⁴, having a key binding malfunction, or when the rules of the game do not operate according to our understanding.

There are game scholars who make parallel claims to my own (see Aylett 1999 or Jenkins 2004) but what I am suggesting is a bit more radical than it first appears. To argue that gameplay takes “place” in between the material and immaterial, the formal and subjective, the real and the imaginary is far from radical; Juul (*Half-Real*) and Nitsche both make this claim, among many other researchers. In fact, many of the classic definitions of games and play depend on the distinction between the real and the unreal as the foundation of games and play (Suits 1978, Huizinga 1949, Caillois 1961, for example). The on-again, off-again adaptation of Huizinga’s term “the magic circle³⁵” in game studies also depends on some kind of abstract barrier of the real and fiction.

³⁴ The fictional narration of some competitive games, such as in e-sports, is often entirely overwhelmed by the factual narration, as the playing of the game is the emphasis of the activity as opposed to the fiction of the game.

³⁵ See “In Defense of a Magic Circle: The Social and Mental Boundaries of Play” by Stenros Jaakko and “There is No Magic Circle” by Mia Consalvo for an overview of the argument.

This is not what I am suggesting. While, for example, Juul separates the “real” rules from the “unreal” fictions of games, he does so under the assumption that games exist without non-fictional narrative elements. This is true; some games are abstract in their representation, open to allegory and interpretation—not narrative. But there is no such thing as a game without real narrative elements within its factual, everyday narration. In creating a binary of “rule” and “fiction,” Juul (and many others) ignore the additional layers of narration, fictions, and rules that players engage in as they play. This binary limitation can be understood as a result of the LvN debate’s polarity and the insistence of ludologists that games cannot be stories. By forcing an imaginary division of story and rules, the ludological study of games narrows the ways we can understand game narratives at all, much less understand their rich potential for deeply personal and meaningful storytelling. To limit games as “not-stories” and to limit stories as “not-games” effectively homogenized what a game could do, could be, could communicate meaning. Of course, video games can be stories. They just are not all fully *fictional* narratives.

This can lead to the temptation to claim that “everything is narrative.” However, it is not that everything is narrative, but rather that “the condition of narrative is unsurpassable” (Readings 49). Not everything is *narrative*, but all experiences are *narratable*. As Tamer Thabet writes,

The very act of narration in games defies the conventional understanding of how stories are told because the player must participate in the narration and because the story is also told by the environment in response to the player’s actions – all nonverbally. This means that the player assumes specific roles in the storytelling, and so, the various concepts of narration, characters, events, and time need reconsideration in the case of video games. (2015, 13)

Multiple narratable moments by multiple narrators, operating at different levels of fictional, factual, and factual-fictional is what forms the default narration of a video game story. Games are narratives that both advance factual statements as well as fictional statements. And on top of that, players advance factual statements in both diegetic and non-diegetic spaces. For example, “betsy presses ‘W’ on the keyboard, Nyx the wood elf moves forward on the screen and towards a digital mountain that betsy wants to explore since she can’t climb a mountain in real life” shares both information that is factual (I did those things; those things happened truthfully) and fictional (betsy is not Nyx the wood elf who moves through Skyrim; betsy in fact has a rather comfortable chair that goes nowhere near a mountain).

Pulling from Bakhtin, we may find the stylistic unity he calls “everyday narration” to be useful in order to understand game spaces through a non-binary system of navigation. Bakhtin’s own use of the style is connected to the Russian literary theory and the concept of *skaz*, which is an “exclusively narratorial phenomenon” (Schmid 2013). Bakhtin describes everyday narration as a “down-to-earth” style in a vernacular speech type (1984, 262). Specifically, everyday narration looks at the language of the “narrating entity” (Schmid 2013) and not character speech or speech within the text spoken from an authorial standpoint (as to be discussed in Chapter 6). Everyday narration in a novel explores a spontaneous, colloquial, and traditionally oral presentation of narrative text, meaning the specific style of narration is spoken within the narrative text. But moreover, everyday narration features:

An [. . .] intellectual distance between the author and the narrator, a non-professional teller, a man of the people, whose narration stands out due to a certain naiveté and clumsiness. This inexperienced narrator does not control all shades of his discourse. The result is a tension, characteristic of *skaz*, between what the narrator would like to say and what he actually reveals unintentionally (Schmid 2013).

In games, everyday narration is deeply complicated due to the multimodal nature of games. But I argue that the player themselves becomes the “non-professional teller” described by Schmid above, due to the ways that players explore space within a game. There is an important difference between players and *skaz* narration, however, specifically looking at the first part of the quoted passage above that references an “intellectual distance.” The *skaz* narration in novels is often set up to portray a lack of intelligence or simplicity in terms of artistic representation. *Skaz* narrators in novels may be played for laughs at times, but I understand players to be like *skaz* narrators due to the power difference between developer and player more than any intellectual level of difference. What I mean by this is simply that the average *Skyrim* player is not an authoring body of the game itself, making them a non-professional who may narrate their experiences with real, down-to-earth vernacular style. *Skaz* narrators are objects of ridicule in novels, but in what we see in gameplay, *skaz* style narration is not. So, a different phrase is needed to describe this phenomenon. Everyday narration in games becomes a kind of stream-of-consciousness kind of discourse filled with interruptions of the fictional with factual elements. I refer to this kind of narration as “player-narration.”

Within the open-world RPG genre, like *Skyrim*, free exploration accounts for the majority of play. This results in a narrative structure that is dominated by everyday narration by the player. Therefore, I would argue that the everyday narration of a game rests squarely with the players’ direction—hence calling it player-narration. Movement within space is to spatial narratives what reading is to novels or viewing is to film. But it is also an act of non-binary navigation, as the written materials (i.e., written by the studio/developers/game writers) must be navigated spatially and dialogically. They narrate their actions *to themselves* in order to navigate spaces. While players may not always narrate their experiences—they may merely act, as opposed to drawing logical connections between events—

many players experience gameplay as an act of player-narration. Cody Mejeur calls this a player's personal narration, noting that:

While this process is a technological and cognitive one, it is also a narrative: it involves the constant organizing of signs and events into meaningful sequences that may or may not be shared with others. (2019, 87).

This combination of fact, fiction, and action gathers the digital, the real, and the symbolic together and puts the player in a position where they must constantly shuffle through signs—an activity that players often find enjoyable, personal, and fulfilling. This is to say, they experience spaces within the game, they make choices about the world and their character's interactions with it.

To illustrate, I gesture towards a short excerpt from a livestream of Evelien Smolders, a professional YouTuber (also known as Gab Smolders), and the first two minutes of one of her *Skyrim* videos. In producing a video to be uploaded as content on the online video sharing platform, Evelien narrates her thoughts and perceptions out loud as she plays. Typically, because games are experiences that become narratives as opposed to purely narrative experiences, players engage in such narration practices, although most do not speak player-narration out loud, unlike Evelien in the following example.

[As the video opens, Evelien is in the middle of looking through a quest menu screen]

“So, we have these open right now...Dragonborn, no that's cultists...Miscellaneous...Retrieve Nettlebane...Meet Delphine. I think this is a main story quest, right?”

She reads from the quest log, “Dragons aren't just coming back to life, they are being resurrected by other dragons. Delphine suspects that [the] Thalmor might be bringing dragons back for some sinister purpose. She's going to talk to her contacts about how we can infiltrate the Thalmor Embassy.”

She pauses. “Yeah.”

“Dawnguard, I think that's DLC...J'Zargo's side thing, Shalidor's writing...ok yeah.”

She opens the game map and hovers her mouse over the quest marker to find Delphine on the map.

“Riverwood, oh yeah, I forgot,” she says as she selects the fast-travel option to instantly bring her to the small town near the start of the game. “It’s all the way at the beginning.”

As the game loads Riverwood, she glances at another screen and thanks a subscriber for joining before returning to her game. She moves her character forward through town, pausing to admire a chicken sitting in the road (“Chicken! Just taking a lil break”) as she continues moving through town in silence.

An NPC interrupts her, stating “You’re pretty, I’ll give you that. Just stay away from my husband, Alvor.”

Evelien pauses for a moment and then continues, commenting, “I’m pretty? But you can’t even see my face!” as she enters the local inn.

“You’re pretty, I’ll give you that,” she says, mimicking the NPC’s comment before the NPC Delphine begins to speak.

“I don’t think you were followed. Come on. I have a plan,” says Delphine. Evelien follows the character in silence before beginning to hum along to the game’s music.

“Not suspicious at all,” she comments as the NPC opens a secret passageway to a hidden room in the inn’s basement. “Do you like my new outfit?” she asks, knowing fully that the NPC can’t respond.

Delphine the NPC continues, “I’ve figured out how we’re going to get you into the Thalmor Embassy.”

Evelien is offered a choice of three dialogue options, “You’re not coming?,” “That didn’t take long,” or “Why not just fight our way in?”

Evelien doesn’t respond to the choice prompt right away; instead she asks Delphine again, “Do you like the empty hole into Oblivion on the back of my knee?”—a comment about a graphical error on her character’s new clothing outfit where there was a gap of nothingness between the top of her boot and the rest of her leg, creating a kind of window right through the character model.

She laughs to herself before reading out loud, “That didn’t take long” from the screen and selects the choice option.

Delphine automatically responds, without a pause, “I’ve been doing this a long time, remember? While the Thalmor’s been looking for me, I’ve been watching them.”

Evelien is reacting out loud for the purposes of creating content for others to view (creating a very literal narrative retelling), but players mentally engage with games in much the same manner, adding both fictional and factual interjections to the narration, ones that aren’t necessarily unintelligent, but certainly aren’t artistically arranged for effect, creating a player-narration or an example of what I

refer to as everyday narration in games. The ways that each player forms ideas, explains connections, and the ways they do or do not include details—what they dismiss, ignore, or emphasize—creates a form of everyday narration unique to video games, one that combines fictional and factual narration. . . . Mejeur notes that this kind of gameplay “demands the freedom and potential for difference, and as players navigate games they create their own unique (and yet similar) narratives” (2020, 2). I too recall running into the same character that the streamer Evelien meets who tells the player to “stay away from” her husband—a gender-specific dialogue that only occurs if the player created a female character. I rolled my eyes, annoyed at the NPC. Later on, I also saw memes on the internet of the same moment from the perspective of an Argonian player—a lizard-person—whose scaly face does not fall into European standards of beauty. It seems that Eveline’s annoyance, and mine, are reflected by the community. The annoyance at the presumptuous, sexist line of dialogue is a factual occurrence across multiple playthroughs, as well as a fictional one.

Jean-Marie Schaeffer supplies a definition of factual narrative as “advanc[ing] claims of referential truthfulness whereas fictional narrative advances no such claims” (2009, 98). According to Schaeffer, factual narratives imply a pragmatic narrator in a way unlike fictional narration does. A pragmatic narrator refers to factual events as understood to be true and referential to the real, non-fictional world. In something like *Skyrim*, we have factual events in a fictional world, a combination of factual and fictional narrations. This is predominantly accomplished through spatial means, as the player is narrating and navigating space and narrative simultaneously. It is this combination of an account of factual, non-diegetic narration and fictional diegetic narration that creates the unique form of player-narration in games.

Building on Mejeur (2019), I continue the line of argument that celebrates the ways that my everyday narration is deeply impacted by my identity. The decisions I make and the responses I have,

such as in the simple example above, are deeply impacted by my queerness; the shifts in my ableness and mental illness; my precarious socio-economic status as a student; my privileged socio-economic status as a white ciswoman; my own experiences and histories with abuse, trauma, pleasures, happiness, and more. Everyday narration in games is permanently subjective, although it is not impossible for it to be shared and recollected at later moments to others. It is personal and unique in its execution.

Despite that, if we're honest, a vast amount of this kind of narration is quite dull—when I think of the kind of everyday narration that occurs in *World of Warcraft*, for example, it's mostly “I walked north for five minutes, I kept walking north, but I then turned west and walked that way for another ten minutes. I'm still not there.” But, as Douglas Adam notes in *So Long, and Thanks for All the Fish*:

Editing, selection, the need to balance that which is interesting with that which is relevant and cut out all the tedious happenstance. And the reasons for this are obvious. It's guff [. . .] it doesn't actually get you anywhere. You don't, in short, want to know. (1984, 137-38).

Most media forms are curated to include relevant and interesting material. Video games stories are, too. This is one of the instances where the difference between “story” and “narrative” means very different things. Video game stories are often action-packed. But the actual default narration of that story in a video game is much more thorough, tedious, and dull. Grinding for experience could use some editing, as far as narrative is concerned. While in novels and written narratives, Barthes makes the distinction between catalyzers and cardinal functions for this very reason, video game play experiences are mostly catalyzers as opposed to cardinal functions experiences. But that is one of the tedious charms of game narrative structures—it does not leave anything out, no matter how long

you've been walking through the Barrens in *World of Warcraft*.³⁶ Yet they remain narratives to the player, as long as the player is narrating their experiences to themselves. While cardinal functions may be far between, other things occur within the game that fill the spaces of narration.

This said, we can see the complexities of everyday narration in video games, how they connect with existing theories of spatial narration in games, and the limitations of binary thinking in narrative exploration. While occurring in multiple spaces—social, material, fictional, factual—it is important to recognize that the player's narration acts as a place-making practice. In a game like *Skyrim* (or *World of Warcraft* for that matter), free exploration accounts for the majority of play, which results in a narrative structure that is dominated by narration by the player. Free exploration, then, leaves the player responsible for narrating the spaces of the story world themselves, filling in chains of causal relationships that trail behind the Dragonborn as they wander the wilderness. Players of open-world RPGs like *Skyrim* are always asked to be the narrators of their indices, forming a personalized and largely invisible form of everyday narration. Framed exploration's more direct narration, free exploration's default narration, and everything in between, all dialogically act as variant speakers of their own languages, ones that may or may not translate to the player's own attempts to understand the game.

Assessing the Queerness of Digital Place-Making

In navigating the spaces of *Skyrim*, players narrate the spaces of the game and arrange the story that they will tell. The navigable space may act as the raw material of narrative, but the intentionality and meaning of that narrative is the player's own; it will be different each time I

³⁶ It takes me about 30 minutes to walk across the entirety of *Skyrim*; it takes me about 20 minutes to walk across the Barrens, one early zone in *World of Warcraft*. To walk across the entire Kalimdor zone, which the Barrens is part of, can take 3 or more hours.

encounter this space throughout time. It is through the destabilizations of default narration within gameplay that the dialogic tensions of a space begin to emerge. But this is also where the inherent queerness of this kind of narration becomes visible. The spaces in the game go beyond its literal environments and become subjective, unique game spaces. What is important, what is enjoyable or interesting, all depends on the player navigating and narrating their play. Many games have plots to varying degrees of interest and importance to players. For example, there is often a “story mode” or campaign version of multiplayer shooter games, but that’s not the main interest of many players. Quite often, the “story mode” in first-person shooter games, such as the *Counter Strike* series, just acts as an interesting way to tutorialize the kinds of skills and knowledge players will need to be successful playing competitively against other players. Other games, like adventure point-and-click games or visual novels, focus entirely on settings, characters, and player engagement. Players of these games will often seek to complete the ending, or the multiple endings, of the story as the game’s win condition.

In the case of *Skyrim*, there is a “main” storyline of quests in the game, but common opinion in forums, fan pages, and social media indicates something odd—the main plot of this well-loved, critically-acclaimed game is often the most disappointing part for its players. As an example, in response to a question on Reddit’s r/skyrim forum, one player explained:

[. . .] it's the weakest part of the game. It's the weakest part of every Bethesda developed RPG. The sheer amount of stuff you can do just dwarfs the main story line. Like my current character is level 50, is archmage, is Thane of six holds (RPing that he's making a power play before picking a side in the war), has learned many dragon shouts, is a thrice over master of Conjunction, has collected seven Daedric artifacts so far (RPing that he's obsessed with the Daedric Lords), and is the Lord of the Volkihar vampire clan. And main story wise I just got the horn of Jurgen Windcaller. (RedditUser1, name anonymized).

I did not prompt this discussion or participate in it, but what the players were already discussing translates to identifying their own experiences balancing different dialogues in the game. In the comment above, RedditUser1 mentions three distinct competing tensions in the game:

- 1) Free Exploration: the free exploration of space has developed a set of functional sequences that have led to the acquisition of titles, skills, and abilities (“my current character is level 50, is archmage, is Thane of six holds [...], has learned many dragon shouts, is a thrice over master of Conjuration, has collected seven Daedric artifacts so far [...], and is the Lord of the Volkihar vampire clan”).
- 2) Player-narration: These sequences described in the dialogue above have developed through a form of default, everyday narration that self-directs indices (“RPing that he’s making a power play” or “RPing that he’s obsessed with the Daedric Lords”)
- 3) Chronotopic: Lastly, the player questions the chronological placement of events, creating a tension between the game’s presentation of catalysers in its functional sequences and forming a stretched chronotype disconnecting the immediacy of the plot from the rest of the narrative (“And main story wise I just got the horn of Jurgen Windcaller”). Fetching the Horn of Jurgen Windcaller is the sixth quest in the main storyline out of a total of nineteen. It should be noted that the tutorial level “Unbound” counts as main line story quests, meaning this player has completed the tutorial level and four other quests to develop the main storyline. At level 50, it is fair to estimate that this player RedditUser1 has put at least 100 hours into the game, as self-reported hours per level in *Skyrim* seem to average around 2 hours of play per level (Blackrat 2011).

The main quest line is a fairly linear set of sequences running parallel and unconnected to many other quest lines, which means that it may be overshadowed by other sequences during gameplay. There are nine faction-focused quest lines (some of which are path-locked and cannot be completed within the same game file, and others which require participation in other faction quests to complete) and four lore-building/history exploration quest lines, in addition to about thirty-three assorted side-quests (most of which have multiple steps in their own smaller quest lines), plus more than 130 one-off tasks the game labels as “miscellaneous quests” that include reaching a specific goal in a dungeon, performing favors, collecting or delivering items, killing a creature or person, persuading a person, fetching items, assisting in tasks, and tutorial quests for crafting. Quite simply, there is so much space to explore and so much of the space is narrated by the player’s default narration that the main plot sequences become disconnected from one another. Players may not view the main story line, or many of the major faction or lore-building quest lines to be the main, as developing the sequences that structure the “main” story. Instead, playing *Skyrim* involves a lot more personal, subjective everyday narration about each player’s own exploration of the space—returning to the concept of player-narration *and* the typical internalized self-narration of experiences. There is little framed exploration of space that would direct a player, but instead, the default narration of the player becomes the story as it happens.

This kind of narration in games like *Skyrim* acts to destabilize and challenge the traditional structures of narrative theory. When we consider RedditUser1’s account of their gameplay, we see a player rejecting the normative structure of the game as supplied by the “main” storyline and fundamentally reshaping the representation and embodiment of space in the game. In “Queer Gaming: Gaming, Hacking, and Going Turbo,” Halberstam explains that queerness can be found in “rethinking the concept of the game, the purpose of the game, the differentials within the game

between winning and losing, and the modes of identification and desire that any given game requires" (2017, 189), and we certainly see this in the case of gameplay like that of RedditUser1 and many other players, myself included. The ways that RedditUser1 is playing *Skyrim* resonate queerly in the number of ways; finding a new body in this space to identify with, as RedditUser1 does in their own roleplaying within the roleplaying game; finding satisfaction in the "incorrect" goals of the game, such as completing and resetting the conjuration magic skill three times; and rejecting the expected pace of the main plotline, as estimated that RedditUser1 has played *Skyrim* for about 100 hours and has only just begun the story "proper"—these are all ways that the story is narrated as structured by the spaces of the game.

Thus far, this analysis has focused on how the structure of the game and its queerness shape the narratives that players experience. However, my examinations of narrative structure and meaning do not focus purely on the structure of a narrative, but also on how the form of that narrative places different abstract "languages" in contact with one another. The ways that these languages resonate or reject one another have a significant impact on what the player understands when they explore the fictional spaces of *Skyrim*. When we approach the kind destabilized narration structure that we see in *Skyrim* queerly, a tension emerges and surrounds the game's neoliberal representation of freedom. In queering *Skyrim*'s spatial narration, a layer of white supremacist doctrine present in the game becomes starkly visible.

Heteroglossic Tensions of *Skyrim*'s Space

To explain and explore place-making, embodiment of space, and navigable space, I will examine how my *Skyrim* character, Nyx, and her engagement with non-navigable space unknowingly invoked a number of dialogic tensions, both inside the game as well as outside of it. For example, it is

in an early area of the game where a player enters Bleak Falls Barrow, a critical space that establishes much of the mythologies governing the world of *Skyrim*. This is where Nyx, the unknowing Dragonborn, first encounters some of the major dialogic tensions of *Skyrim* through navigating a world space specifically designed to structure my experiences through environmental storytelling.

Nyx the wood elf is an archer, but not a very good one (yet.)

I don't sneak into the Bleak Falls Barrow, and I am attacked by bandits camping outside the building. After trading hits and misses with our bows, the bandits are defeated and I'm pretty injured. Shoving a loaf of bread, two apples, and a slice of cheese into my mouth, I continue inside. Inside the temple vestibule are two bandits around a campfire, who attack me on sight. After a clumsy swap to a sword, I'm safe and cautiously begin to explore. I meet a few more bandits as I explore but ambush them instead of the other way around—at least until I find my way into a small room with a locked iron-barred gate blocking my progress. And another bandit who gets the drop on me. I defeat him and loot the coins off his body before looking around. How do I get through this gate?

My first reaction is to try to pick the lock, but that is not an option for some reason I don't understand. How do I open this door? A lever in front of the door can be pulled, but when I pull it, poisonous darts zing out of the walls and hit me. Not doing that again. Thankfully, as a wood elf, I'm resistant to poisons, so I remain healthy. The small room has a short set of stairs leading to a tiny loft area above the gate. Maybe I can jump over the gate? But instead of a hole in the wall or gap to squeeze through, there is a small bookcase and two animals carved into unmovable pillars on the wall. Rummaging through the bookcase does not produce anything immediately helpful. I stare at the animals—a snake and a whale—and jump back down. When I land next to the gate, I notice another similar pillar on the ground. Fallen, perhaps? I then feel stupid, as to the left of the pillar on the ground (another snake), there are three pillars that I can interact with; when I do so, they twirl around, revealing either a hawk, a snake, or a whale. I match those pillars up to the images found (snake, snake, whale) and pull the lever.

This small moment is looking at Nyx's engagement with her physical environment within the game.

The ways that space is arranged will motivate and guide players in a specific way. The ecology of a designed space, according to Worch and Smith, refers to elements placed into the physical properties (2010, 7). The ways I interact with the space are carefully designed. In this moment of *Skyrim*, Nyx was guided by several “physical” properties of the room. The staircase affords climbing. The lever affords pulling. The three movable pillars afford spinning and arranging. I climbed the stairs without

a second thought, immediately understanding that I was able to go up the stairs and already thinking about ways I could use the physical properties of the staircase to my advantage in the puzzle, hoping I could climb over the obstacle in my path. Instead, the stairs are placed to encourage players to access an area that showcases puzzle pieces—the two unmovable pillars in the wall. The bookcase affords interaction as well, but it does not help the player to solve the puzzle. Instead, it is more of a lure; had I seen a plain ledge at the top of the staircase, I would be less incentivized to climb it and look around, compared to reaching the bookcase, finding nothing, and turning back to the rest of the ledge. The default narration of an early-game dungeon might be my own, but my interactions and reactions to the space are guided and structured by the design of the space itself. The spaces available and unavailable to navigate for the player, the visual, aural, and embodied aesthetics of play, the spaces of cognition between the real world and the play world—all of these are interactions which converse within game narratives which can be explored dialogically.

Worch and Smith explain that game environment “Uses player reference to communicate simulation boundaries and affordance” (2010, 6), which is precisely the kind of dialogic relationship that forms the basis of dialogism. In selecting Worch and Smith’s 2010 Game Developers Conference speech, I am deliberately focusing on industry and development-centered definitions of spatial storytelling. Bakhtin himself refers to this kind back-and-forth between fiction and reality within the novel as the double-voicedness of the narration. Bakhtin argues that there are “two levels” in every story, “on one, in the level of the narrator, a belief system filled with his objects, meanings and emotional expressions, and the other, the level of the author, who speaks (albeit in a refracted way) by means of this story and through this story” (1981, 314). In a video game, we can consider these two levels to operate in a similar way; the emotional expressions, personal choices, and gestalt experiences of the player and then the ways that the player is being directed or oriented and the

embedded, refracted beliefs therein. However, these two levels are by necessity dialogical and tension-laded due to their double-voiced nature. In looking at novels, Bakhtin notes that this effect reveals itself as:

[. . .] *another's speech in another's language*, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type of *double-voiced discourse*. It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author. In such discourse there are two voices, two meanings and two expressions. And all the while these two voices are dialogically interrelated, they—as it were—know about each other (just as two exchanges in a dialogue know of each other and are structured in this mutual knowledge of each other); it is as if they actually hold a conversation with each other. (1981, 324; emphasis original).

Dialogism has been applied to a wide variety of discourses, objects, and narratives since the 1930s (or 1980s, for European and colonial-settler scholars), but it is with the video game that dialogism seems to shine most clearly. In video games, the symbolic and representational functions of a space supplies players with an understanding of the purpose of that space based on outside references. The narration of the fiction is dependent on the narration of the factual, and moreover, it is designed to be this way. This design requires the player to create a dialog between their own cultural context and the digital spaces of the game, playing with meanings based on the connections between the fictional represented space and the player's understanding of particular social and cultural cues. Worch and Smith summarize it as “how [environments] communicate through familiar references” (2010, 11), which is a simplified but functional way to understand the visual rhetorics of visual game space which can be expanded and enriched by considering the process as dialogical.

It is through a dialogical reading of the queered spaces of *Skyrim* that an uncomfortable conversation begins to sourly resonate. The typical fantasy video game tropes in the game—being born to save the world, player-character exceptionalism, imperialistic control, and mastery of spaces through unique powers—are nothing unusual. But what is unusual about *Skyrim*'s use of tropes is

how heavily they lean on adaptations of Norse and German mythologies that have become rooted in white supremacist views of race. Beginning from the smallest detail—a few carvings of animals on a wall early in the game—Skyrim’s spaces grow and build a complex dialog about race, colonialism, and the rise of authoritarian powers. The micro-level dialog that I began building as Nyx figured out a puzzle in a dungeon will crest into a large-scale, macro-level narrative. But with my own everyday narration leading me so far, I understand this space’s languages in a one-sided manner; the narrative is whispering to me, but I cannot yet hold a conversation. I do not yet speak the language. I just don’t know enough yet about Skyrim specifically. In this moment of Nyx’s journey, it is the first time I have encountered these symbols on these pillars, which are a repeated puzzle-motif throughout the game. The puzzles consist of simple pattern replication featuring creatures found in the wilds of Skyrim (the bear, fox, wolf, hawk, moth), as well as wildlife that is not seen in Skyrim, but is simple enough to imagine as part of the world (the whale, snake, and owl). The style of the carvings reads “Vikings” to my mind—combined with the horned helmet on the floor, the proud and angry Nords I met outside the cave who cried out their ownership to the cold lands, the carvings themselves send my mind alight with images of ancient peoples and their technologies, crude iron tools to carve simple sigil-styled outlines of native creatures to the cold world around them.

But there’s the interesting catch—the inclusion of a dragon in these motifs suggests something else about the world entirely. Nyx was subject to the first dragon attack in centuries earlier in the game but seeing them here in an ancient tomb implies a different kind of relationship to the creatures. Dragons, in this world’s history, were intelligent, cruel beings who enslaved the Nords before being overthrown and hunted down by Nord warrior-heroes. I might not understand the large-scale plot points that are being introduced spatially at this point, but I do understand Vikings outside of the game. The setting of *Skyrim* is a deliberate *mélange* of Viking mythos, specifically mixing the

concepts of historical Iron Age Vikings within the barrows and tombs, and more medieval-era Vikings in the game's present day. Even though those animals do not live in Skyrim, these creatures are often depicted in cave paintings and carvings in real-life historical Arctic Stone Age art (Shetelig and Falk 1978, 99) and that makes sense to me. I have seen pictures of cave paintings and carvings and tools and art in museums. I have seen countless TV shows, movies, books, and video games that have told me a lot about Vikings. So that is where I am able to draw my understanding from so far in the game—this is what makes whales and snakes so plausible as part of the game world, despite not being in the game itself.

After I solve the puzzle, the gate opens; I crouch into the sneak position and cautiously walk into the next room. A wooden staircase spirals down into a darker room. A giant rat and a table are in the room. There's a scroll on the table—fireballs are always fun—but also a number of linen cloth bolts. I collect them, hoping they can be crafted into bandages or something, but I find they are not immediately useful.

Arvel, the jerk of a bandit who stole the item I need to retrieve for the quest, runs away from me before I can confront him. I try to sneak in after him, figuring he can't get very far—last time he was on his own, he almost got eaten by a giant spider.

As I crouch quietly and descend the stairs, the scenery changes. Rows of mummified bodies are stacked in the walls. Then one moves. And since I am not very good at sneaking around yet, it immediately sees me and comes lumbering towards me with an axe. Yelping in surprise, I fire a short barrage of arrows into the creature's torso. Aiming at it, an interface appears informing me the amount of hit points/health the creature has and its name. It's called a Draugr, a word I am not familiar with. Arvel is still fleeing from me, but he is also under attack, trying to free himself from both my pursuit and the Draugr's swords. We manage to defeat the creatures and he begins to run away from me again, but he steps on an odd stone on the floor. A spiked gate swings into the room violently, immediately killing Arvel. I'm a bit dazed, but I pick the item off his body. It's a small model of a dragon's claw made of gold. Turning it over and examining it in the Items menu shows there is a bear, a moth, and an owl carved into the back of the golden claw.

In retrospect, I understand this as some of the first context hints for this place. Worch and Smith discuss how “the environment contextualizes experience and even exerts influence over the identity the player takes during play” (2010, 12), noting that identity in games is both contextual and performative. They argue that players need cues from the environment to help them understand the

kinds of behaviors afforded and constrained within a space (2010, 11). Believe it or not, puzzle-solving is not an emphasized element in most of *Skyrim*'s spaces. It's truly only common in these tombs and barrows. This is an action game, after all, and not a puzzle-game. It's not surprising that the puzzles are not difficult and to solve them, players use the "interact" option as they would with any object in the game, implying that puzzles are treated as objects and not processes. I play *Skyrim* on a PC, so to interact with any object, including puzzles, I press the "E" key on my keyboard. The mouse buttons, which in PC gaming are contextually the key actions of a game (like in the FPS games described above), triggers the mechanics and rules of offense/defense processes with weapons or spells. "Interact" is a catch-all command that allows our Dragonborn the opportunity to read books, eat food, drink potions, open doors, talk to people, and more—including solving ancient door puzzles.

This door in Bleak Falls Barrow is the first of many of these door puzzles. Entering the space beyond this door is a change to the rest of *Skyrim* for players. Had I, at the time, been interested enough in the word "Draugr" that labeled the awful creature at my feet, I would have found that it is a "common Old Norse designation for deceased persons who live on after death. Usually, the terms apply to persons who had committed an evil deed during their lifetime, and who became ghosts or revenants" (Pulsiano and Wolf 1993, 624). While the word has existed in Norse mythology for ages, it is now very associated with *Skyrim* in popular culture. The root of the term is widely shared on fan wikis, guides, and discussions about the game. This is one of the many early clues that begins to focus on a crucial double-voicedness in *Skyrim*: the perception of Nords as idealized Vikings, which are in and of themselves a romanticized myth.

In "The Origins of the Imaginary Viking," Johnni Langer traces the history of the contemporary understanding of the Viking back to various nineteenth century Romantic literary movements across Europe, noting that "the modern image of the European Barbarian was created. . .

as an answer to the yearning of the diverse nationalistic movements [in 19th century Europe], creating an image of old landscapes and medieval characters to help in the construction of modern identities” (2002, 6). Similar “barbarian” figures were formed and romanticized during the same period across Europe; Celtic warriors were of interest to the French, imagined Teutonic culture formed by Germans, and the Vikings constructed by Scandinavian countries (Langer 2002, 6). Inspired by Romantic Era paintings, non-Scandinavian cultures across Europe piled these romanticized barbarian figures together, a combination of all things they understood as both White and Other—including the now ubiquitous horned helmets of Vikings that Scandinavian Vikings did not actually wear. Langer points to Richard Wagner, the German composer, as partially responsible for the popularization of these decorative helmets, as his operas often featured Othered populations in elaborate costumes, particularly with helmets adorned with wings, horns, or branches (2002, 7). It is not a coincidence that Nordicism, as espoused by white supremacists, has drawn on Wagner as a cultural ideal based on Hitler’s engagement with the composer’s work. As Kaufman and Sturtevant remind us:

White supremacists view the Middle Ages as a heroic and glorious time not in spite of horrors like the Crusades and the widespread violence against Jews, but because of them. They believe they are continuing a medieval struggle—whether that’s the so-called Aryan medieval hero’s struggle against the gods or the Christian crusaders’ holy wars. (2020, 54).

While Wagner’s own virulent anti-Semitism was never mentioned by Hitler in any of his writing about Wagner’s music, the anti-Semitic portrayals of Jewish people in Wagner’s operas would have been appealing or even natural to Hitler’s vision of the world³⁷. Hitler’s personal enjoyment of Wagner’s work led to the use of Wagner’s operas as propaganda by the Third Reich (Horowitz 1993)—a dangerous connection between Wagner’s use of Nordic mythology and the Nationalist

³⁷ Wagner was a known friend and associate of Arthur de Gobineau, author of “An Essay on the Inequalities of the Human Races,” (Rowbotham 154) which is discussed later in this section.

movements of the era. This does not mean any use of the iconic helmet is by nature Anti-Semitic by intention, but its roots are found deep within white supremacy and Nordicism itself.

The undead monsters of Bleak Falls Barrow wear these helmets, unsurprisingly. After all, the horned helmet is a pop culture visual shortcut for all things “Viking.” The Draugr in *Skyrim* are emaciated, pseudo-mummified beings wearing tatters of ancient battle armor or robes, skin shrinking against their skeletal frames, faces bulging with supernaturally glowing blue eyes. *Skyrim*’s Nords find the creatures abhorrent, believing these undead are the results of evil magic or immoral decisions in Draugr’s previous lifetime; their undeath might be a punishment in some ways, but it was also a choice sought by power-hungry people who believed in the wrong things in life—at least, bad people according to citizens and books found in the game. Necromancy and magic are un-Nord-like, as these people of *Skyrim* have an aversion to magical knowledge and prefer an axe to a spell any day. But the appearance of these evil Draugr in this space begins to suggest something I do not yet understand. From a narrative standpoint, this entire barrow is spatialized foreshadowing, hinting at future legends, puzzles, enemies, and buildings to come.

I sneak through the underground tunnels and spaces, finding Draugr at every turn, but also helpful loot and useless items. I find a lot of embalming and burial tools, like scalpels and linen cloth, but these are not useful items to Nyx, nor are they worth anything. She can't use the cloth or the tools. She could collect them to sell, but it would take a large quantity of them to be worth the effort of carrying them around. I would later find out many merchants don't want to buy them, either. What's with the useless items?

Context. The main emphasis of environments in games, according to Worch and Smith, is to provide “narrative context” (2010, 13). More precisely, what they are referring to broadly as narrative context is indexical narrative operations, as opposed to narrative functions which are carried out by the player or by cinematic cutscenes. They define environmental storytelling as “the act of staging player-space with environmental properties that can be interpreted as a meaningful whole, furthering the narrative

of the game” (2010, 16) that depends on the player to connect separate elements of the environment and interpret them together (2010, 18), which requires a forensic lens to environments in games. Pulling together problem-solving and the causal relationships between placed objects and locations allows players a multitude of possible interpretations, each informed by their own contexts. Crucially, Clara Fernández-Vara notes that:

Two running ideas seem to be the spine of environmental storytelling: one, the narrative shapes the space, and navigating it constructs the narrative sequence; two, the player must piece the story together, interpreting the objects and events in the space. (2011, 4).

The combination of designed elements and causal logic by the player emphasized by both Worch and Smith and Fernández-Vara integrates not with narrative functions as defined by Barthes, but more with indexical and informant operations. Fernández-Vara notes that the designers leave “traces” — icons, signs, symbols—for players locate and make meaning from. It allows for a form of narration not typically seen in novels or films that helps to explain the setting and the characters within it. Because they are traces, environmental storytelling is usually devoted to explaining past circumstances, establishing facts, and setting details, and providing navigational clues towards the affordances and constraints of the space. Environmental storytelling helps lay down the bases of dialogic interplay in game spaces; however, they are not one and the same. We can read environmental cues as a grammar of a spatial dialogue, but these traces and cues are lacking verbs within that language; they must be activated. Resisting the binary of player against environment, we must instead examine the narrative function of the player as part of the environment. The player, who is part of these traces and cues, can be considered the missing verbs in this dialogue, activating spatial narratives within the game.

I wind my way through tunnels and inch my way through Draugr-infested burial chambers; with a laugh, I notice myself unconsciously leaning to the sides in my chair, trying to peer around a corner in the game. Screens don't work that way, but

the space here feels so interesting, so laden with affect and tantalizing hints of something important to come, I can't help but forget where I physically am—at my desk, wearing headphones and focusing entirely on the glowing screen in front of me. I wander through carved grey stone tunnels, emerge into natural cave systems and back into the man-made tunnels again. The narrow walls around me straighten out and shift in color. Where previous walls were grey, often with a strange curling pattern carved into them, I find myself in a small chamber with brown-tan stone walls that reflect gold in the light. An intricate wall is at the other end of the chamber and there are no Draugr in sight; this does not seem like a burial chamber. On the walls I notice something; a mural or carving that is very different from anything I've seen so far. It's a noteworthy difference, but it doesn't mean anything yet.

Later, as I explored more tombs and spaces of the game, I understood what this mural was telling me, long before I could have understood what was being narrated by this strange dialogic language of Skyrim. But for now, all Nyx saw was a strange piece of art.

Dressed in robes, a central figure wields two stylized daggers, casting their arms to either side. They are wreathed in flames but untouched or unhurt by it. They seem to be beckoning to three figures to the right and left on the carving who carry a sarcophagus on their backs. The top of the carving features a dragon, its horned face hovering over the central figure, its wings unfurled over the followers to the sides. The horns on the dragon's head resemble the same kind of horned-helmets worn by the more powerful Draugr—the classic neomedieval Viking helm again.

While the carvings are hard to see in person, the murals become recognizable as foreshadowing a major plot point of the main plot regarding the Dragon Crisis, the Dragon Cults, and the return of Alduin, the World Eater. The Draugr, as it turns out, are the simple-minded undead guardians of the Dragon Priests, a long dead cult who worshiped Dragons as gods. Led by a prophecy that the dragons would return and retake the world, members of the Dragon Cult commit ritualistic suicide so they would rise again when the dragons returned. This carving depicts a Dragon Priest and some of his followers as they perform the ritual to become Draugr. Overhead, the World-Eater dragon Alduin looks down on the orchestrated death practiced in his name.

These traces, as Fernández-Vara refers to them, act as very strong indices. The warning of the undead, the story behind the return of the dragons, and the beginnings of the prophecy coming to life in front of the player's eyes. The Nords' pantheon of gods includes a dragon as an avatar of one of the nine gods, the other avatars being the hawk, snake, moth, owl, bear, wolf, and whale, as seen on the puzzles in the tombs. Dragons are natural creatures to the world of Tamriel—very powerful and sentient creatures, but just as natural within the world as the Nords themselves. Alduin is one of these gods, and through his urging, dragons themselves became deified, no longer an avatar to the gods, but demigods themselves under the rule of Alduin. After conquering the province now called Skyrim, the Nords were enslaved and often sacrificed to the dragons, led by the Dragon Cult priests, such as the ones depicted on the wall carving. The dragon Paarthurnax, lieutenant and younger sibling of Alduin, betrays Alduin and teaches the ancient Nords the Voice, which they use to overthrow Alduin by subduing him and then sending him forward in time with the aid of one of the titular Elder Scrolls. However, the Nords understood that it was only a matter of time until Alduin reappeared in their world.

Narrative Implications of Spatial Dialogics

But I know nothing of the history of the Nords and the dragons when I first see these carvings as Nyx. What I do understand is it is some kind of a warning, a tension, a sense of apprehension. I cannot interact with the mural—it is non-navigable, non-interactive space—and there is nothing gesturing towards the murals except for its strangeness within the room. I do not understand, and this world feels much too big for my smallness, my poor combat abilities, my weak control of magic. I do not belong in this space, not just because I am an elf in an ancient Nord tomb, but because as a player, I know nothing about this universe. I have never played an *Elder Scrolls* game before. I have no idea

what I am looking at. It is frustrating and isolating to understand it means *something* but comprehending it is just out of reach.

I peer at the carvings in the dim light of this strange chamber before examining the far wall. Some of the animal motifs from before are on the door. Remembering the spinning puzzle before, I find I can activate and rotate three rings on the wall, and I line up the symbols to match those on the claw. The wall begins to lower into the floor, a vast chamber ahead. Bats rush at my face as I explore the room. I note there is a large treasure chest near a closed sarcophagus that, based on my previous experiences with scary things in games, I expect will be flung open by an angry Draugr. But behind the chest and sarcophagus is a wall that has completely attracted my attention. A glowing light pulses on the wall, covered with elaborate runes and carvings. I can hear something as I get closer—a rhythmic chant. As I get closer still, the noise is louder, paired with the sounds of a rushing wind. Suddenly, the contrast levels of color and light rise drastically, the sound and visuals blur until all I can see is a glowing light. Then, the world is righted again, and the user interface reads “Word of Power Learned.” I do not have time to puzzle over what this means, as the sarcophagus predictably flies open.

Visually speaking, the described effects—blurring and high contrast, which are narrative decisions and visual narration—are disorienting and confusing at the moment, revealing both the mysterious nature of these powers as well as their strength. In a later quest, I am told that language itself has a power to those who can use it, called the Voice, a physical projection of the speaker’s intent. This power is the highly revered lure for the Dragon cultists; they wanted to be able to master such a powerful tool. Some of the more talented and powerful Dragon Priests and even Draugr, can use weak versions of shouts. During what would have been their execution, the player saw a dragon rain fire upon the ground with such a shout. According to Nord legend, The Voice is a mythical power that belongs to the Dragons in Nord culture; that Ulfric Stormcloak used a shout to kill the king and attempt to take the throne speaks of his qualifications to rule in the eyes of many Nords, as he controls the power of dragons, like the famous Nord king-become-god Talos. But no human can master shouts as proficient as a dragon, unless they are one of the few souls blessed by the gods who can use the Voice naturally—a person born with the soul of a dragon. A Dragonborn. That, of course, is you.

Congratulations, you were born with the soul of a dragon, and you never knew until you wandered into a cave in cold, back-woods Skyrim, of all the places in Tamriel.

The main storyline of the game is related to this plot element, as the Dragonborn does not know about their powers, so they must learn to use it as the story progresses. But there is a strong implication that it should be a Nord who has this power; why would any other race have this ability, taught to the Nords by the chosen heroes of their goddess, a desperate effort to aid them in their fight for freedom? In all the history of Dragonborns, there had never once been one who was not human, and arguably, never one who was not a Nord³⁸. And certainly not an elf, of all peoples. When I made Nyx, I didn't know being an elf would be a problem here. I just wanted to be an archer and wood elves have more archery skills at the start of the game. But apparently, Nords have a long history of war with all elves, and the Voice has been used as a tool of subjugation against all non-human races who come into contact with the Nords.

Fantasy races have a long history of problematic implications (Douglas 2012) and *Skyrim* is no different. This becomes especially problematic when cultures are defined by race, as they are in *Skyrim*. In reality, race is a social construct derived from differences in appearance or ascribed ancestry, but in *Skyrim*—as well as many other fantasy genre games, films, and books for that matter—race is biological as well as social, which already begins to set a dangerous precedent. There are biological differences between different races in terms of their appearances, but more importantly, there are differences in terms of the races' abilities—some are better warriors, some are better at

³⁸ The Elder Scrolls series is a bit unclear on this when it comes to some of the previous Dragonborn. Some existed before the Nords were named as such, but all were humans who used the power in support of the Nords.

magic, some at archery or speech, etc.. Socially and culturally, some races are treated negatively and others positively.

Broadly, the player can choose between the racial categories of man (four kinds of humans), mer (three kinds of elves), and beast folk (two kinds of animal-like humanoids and the orcs.) The player's race impacts how they are perceived and responded to within the spaces of the game. Players will find that Nords—the lightest skinned humans who have gained racial majority in the province—are given the most preferential treatment in dialog with others and only face discrimination if they learn magic, since magic is a suspicious elf-y thing. If the player is an Altmer—a magically gifted “high elf,” the player will receive frosty skepticism from many Nords in the province and outright racism in other cases. Khajiit and Argonian players—the “animal-like” races—are treated the most poorly, constantly subject to systemic and social strife.

But, as the player is choosing their race, they may or may not have this knowledge. What is supplied for the player at the character creation menu does not indicate the racially oppressive forces in this world. What players are supplied with is a short flavor description, so to speak—a short, cheerful diegetically sound explanation of the race's history, origins, and in-game abilities that acts to conflate race, culture, and ethnicity³⁹. Continuing the above example, Nords are described as,

³⁹ Meanwhile, the Argonian people are summarized as “This reptilian race, well-suited for the treacherous swamps of their Black Marsh homeland, has developed a natural resistance to diseases and the ability to breathe underwater. They can call upon the Histskin to regenerate health very quickly,” and the Khajiit as “Hailing from the province of Elsweyr, they are intelligent, quick, and agile. They make excellent thieves due to their natural stealthiness. All Khajiit can see in the dark at will and have unarmed claw attacks.” Functionally in the world, choosing one of these races will mean constant commentary on the player's race. In particular, Argonians are constantly subject to discrimination even to the point where they are not allowed in one of the major cities in Skyrim. Unsurprisingly, the city is Windhelm, home of Ulfric Stormcloak and the base of Stormcloak operations across Skyrim. There are additional layers of segregation in Windhelm for elves, too. Afterall, the Stormcloak battle cry is “Skyrim belongs to the Nords.”

“Citizens of Skyrim, they are a tall and fair-haired people. Strong and hardy, Nords are famous for their resistance to cold and their talent as warriors. They can use a Battlecry to make opponents flee.” High Elves, meanwhile, are described as “Also known as ‘Altmer’ in their homeland of Summerset Isle, the high elves are the most strongly gifted in the arcane arts of all the races. They can call upon their Highborn power to regenerate Magicka quickly.” The only hints an inexperienced player will see at this point that playing a Nord character will result in a less abrasive Skyrim is that they are the “citizens” of Skyrim as opposed to listing a “homeland” like we see in other descriptors. However, Tamriel’s elite scholars—and potentially, a random Dragonborn elf wandering around the province—have read enough to understand that the Nord people are immigrants to Tamriel, as are elves⁴⁰. It is only through the careful and consistent perusal of books and literature in *Skyrim* that players encounter this important fact.

According to the in-game book, *Before the Ages of Man*, the Altmer were the first colonizers to arrive, seeking refuge from a disaster or threat to their homeland that is now lost to the ages. The Altmer arrived in southern Tamriel and displaced all native populations they encountered, forcing them to swamps, jungles, deserts, and wastelands where Argonian, Khajiit, and Orc populations still live. The present-day Nords immigrated from the northern continent of Atmora during a brutal civil war, settling in northern Tamriel and displacing and conquering beast-folk and elves as they re-colonized the lands known as Skyrim. But this piece of history is rejected or unknown to most. Instead, dominant Nord belief places them as the first race of humans on Tamriel, chosen children of

⁴⁰ All elves, except for the Orcs. Only Orcish, Argonian and Khajiit people are native to the land, and Orcs are a kind of elf in the world of Tamriel. However, they are significantly discriminated against to the point of erasure as elves and as independent people in Skyrim.

the goddess Kyne. It is not commonly understood or believed that Nords are immigrants but believe themselves to have been given their place in Skyrim by their gods.

At the moment of character creation, though unless a player is well-versed in Tamriel's history and *The Elder Scrolls* lore as a whole, they will not know of these tensions and dialogues hidden between the lines of the supplied text in the character creation menu. What a player does see in the description of Nords is a well-known dialogue with the real-world mythology of Viking warriors—fair skinned, hardy, northern acclimated warriors with a fierce battle-cry. But this also, unsurprisingly, lines up with descriptions of the Aryan race in the work of many scientific racists, white supremacists, Nazis, and eugenicists. Arthur de Gobineau, one of the earliest authors of white supremacist racial separatist dogma, described the Aryan race as the pinnacle of civilization and humankind, “of noble stature, handsome appearance, and warlike disposition” with the power and intelligence to match (Rowbotham 1939, 162). De Gobineau argues that the rise of empires and the formation of civilizations hinges on the racial purity of its people, and the fall of these empires deriving from contaminating pure Aryan bloodlines too much with inferior races. Specifically pointing towards German Aryans, de Gobineau believed that:

. . .in politics he is an individualist. When he associates with his fellows of other racial stock it is the association of master and servant, for the nobility of his features, the vigor and majesty of his tall stature and his muscular strength make of him a super-man. His whole life is regulated by the cult of freedom . . . He is his own judge of morality and ethics, committing his share of reprehensible acts with a kind of godlike superiority over good and evil. For religion his imagination builds for him a pantheon where the gods are only dimly distinguished from the heroes of his race. His paradise is a Valhalla where wine and blood flow freely. (Rowbotham 1939, 163).

We can easily see these traits in the Nords of Skyrim: unsurpassed in battle, engaging in a bloody war against perceived oppressors in the name of their religious freedom; the god Talos that the Nords are fighting the empire to worship as part of their pantheon is literally a Nord who they believe rose to the ranks of the gods; the “true” Nords believe a battle by combat is the only way to fairly, traditionally

select a leader; unjust laws can be broken and fought; the Nord afterlife, Sovngarde, is an adaptation of the Nordic mythological Valhalla wherein the mead hall is a Viking funeral ship filled with heroes of old sparring and drinking—not to mention the phrase itself comes from the Norwegian words “Søvn” and “garde” or “sleep guard”; etc..

De Gobineau’s essay, however, was “virtually unnoticed” by contemporary and future generations of German people (Kale 2010, 60), although his ideas were later revised into Nazi propaganda, leaving out all the parts where de Gobineau argued that the Aryan race could only die out slowly as well as all the political commentary about the inefficiency of French leadership in the seventeenth century—de Gobineau argued that the royalty of France had no divine right to lead, as they were not pure Aryans and could not have been chosen by God to rule (Kale 2010). And although the Nordicism is clearly present already, it was Karl Penka’s 1883 *Origins of the Aryans* that made the leap from German to Scandinavian roots, as well as the text which defined the characteristics of Nordicism we understand today:

. . . the purest blood is found in Scandinavia among the fair-haired, blue-eyed, dolichocephalic Swedes. The pure Aryans, he maintains, are represented only by the North Germans and Scandinavians, a most prolific race, of great stature, muscular strength, energy, and courage, whose splendid natural endowments enabled it to conquer the feebler races to the East, the South, and the West, and to impose its language on the subject peoples. (qtd. In Kale 2010, 45-46)

He additionally refers to the original Nordic people as “a vigorous race, large of limb, stout of heart, tenacious in will, with abundant physical energy, taking their pleasure in drinking and hunting. They had broad shoulders, fair hair, and blue eyes” (Kale 2010, 45)⁴¹. It would not seem out of place to see this literal piece of white supremacist writing replacing the in-game description of the Nords.

⁴¹ Later in life, de Gobineau wrote *The History of Ottar Jarl, Norwegian Pirate and of his Descendants* in which he traces his racial heritage from his position as a French aristocrat to Vikings and proclaims very literally, “I descend from Odin” (Rowbotham 154).

Underpinned by the biological nature of race in the game, nearly all the rhetoric around the Nords, from the in-game books, conversations, locations, and events, fits into white supremacist ideals of race, regardless of intent by the developers. The tomb spaces, in particular, evoke languages of historical accuracy or realism within the game's spaces as the architectural style of the tombs as well as their supplied mythology connect cleanly to current popular culture precedence.

The conflict of real-world ideology and in-game world-building provokes a discordant message. The history of the Nords and their relationship to the dragons, then, are connected to the real-world mythos of the modern Viking. This is connecting the legitimizing and sympathizing of white supremacy through the game and the ways players can interact with its spaces. The neomedieval setting of *Skyrim* pushes players into a space where these languages are spoken through many forms, including the everyday narration created by players themselves. These narrative forms within the game push against what players understand about idealized Vikings and notions of white supremacy. However, this embodiment of race that players engage in as they play is challenged by the experiences they will encounter as they engage in the space and through the implied temporal logics weaving through the spaces.

Conclusion

Not all players will recognize the dialogic languages present within their experiences. In fact, few players will see the ubiquitous horned helm and think, "ah yes, Nazis." However, *Skyrim*'s spaces prime players to encounter modalities that make references to white supremacy through visual, navigable, and interactive spaces. As Bjørkelo notes of white nationalist website Stormfront users discussing the game:

When *Skyrim* is a parallel to our real world for Stormfront, it appears as an idealized version of it. It is a world where *Skyrim* can truly be for the Nords, and where they have the chance to actually be the masters of their own white domain. In *Skyrim* they

are not only the true heroes, but they are also able to affect changes without the real-world consequences that their actions would provoke. (2020). How a player embodies themselves within this space—as an elf, human, orc, or any other option—becomes tied to their relationship to Nords. *Skyrim* as a text resonates most vividly when the player embodies one of these Nord characters, when players are part of the larger system of Nordicism and its associations with white supremacy.

Now, time and space are never truly separate. But when we focus on space, when we allow space to become dominant over time, we encounter a narration of that space which specifically depends on player interaction and self-narration. Players are encouraged to dominate the spaces of *Skyrim* with their own embodiment, but that embodiment is subject to double-voiced commentary and dialogues that complicate the player's relationships to their body. The ways that players are oriented to spaces depends on temporal properties as well, but when we focus specifically on spaces, we explore the ways that bodies are oriented in space by the space itself, making it possible to connect the ways that players engage in space as narrative-building. The kinds of narratives that players build depend on the visual and interactive languages that they encounter throughout the space.

Viewing the relationships and languages of *Skyrim*'s spaces through these dialogues allows for a new understanding of narrative space in video games, one that highlights the practices and structures that oppose and sustain heteronormative narratives as well as white supremacist ones. Indeed, as Bernadette Flynn writes, “navigating computer space is a cultural act” and more precisely, it is “a culturally specific form of play” (2004, 59). Without a more comprehensive understanding, a player can lose much of the meaning of these cultures and dialogues, which also sacrifices the possibility of taking the themes from *Skyrim* off the screen and into real life. In reading the representation, embodiment, and experiences of *Skyrim*'s spaces, the complex dialogues of social, cultural, religious, racial, political, and economic ideologies are made distinct and visually clear.

Chapter 6: Time

Introduction

Having explored the different modes of space-time and spatiality in *Skyrim*, we can focus on the third portion of this dissertation's foci; temporality. This chapter will explore temporal dialogics in two intertwined forms: the structure of time and temporality in the game (diegetic temporality) and the narrative expressions of the game as a played object (extradiegetic temporality). While I typically avoided these questlines in my own play, this chapter will explore the Civil War questlines in *Skyrim*, which are an important part of the environmental context of the game. Players are almost immediately thrust into the civil war right from the beginning cutscene of the game and one of the first side-quests that opens up to the player is to join a side of the war⁴². The languages evoked in *Skyrim*'s temporal rhythms and patterns form a withdrawing effect from the severities and realities of the war, almost like watching it from a distance even as participating in it. Even as the Dragonborn sacks major cities, the results are mostly visual—a few ruined buildings here and there are all that represent major political, social, and economic upheaval.

The first part of this chapter will explore and analyze the ways through which time creates a language through its temporal beats. The second part will explore how time outside of the game—the real-world cultural movements of my own context—changes the ways I understand the game's temporal languages. When writing this chapter, I first tried to do the former and avoid the latter as a

⁴² It is optional to complete the Civil War plotline when playing the Main Quests of the game. Quests are labeled according to type, and although the Civil War questlines are considered major questlines, they are not part of the main questlines. The context of the Civil War certainly impacts it, but you can play *Skyrim* without ever joining either faction. You will have to negotiate a cease-fire if you do this, but it is entirely optional to join the war otherwise.

major focus of the argument. Not because my experiences are mere anecdotes—as discussed in my methodology, my own experiences and perceptions of gameplay are crucial to my analysis—but because I felt almost guilty that so much of my immediate context, of an American living in Canada during the Covid-19 pandemic and US presidency of Donald Trump, was too obvious. Too easy. Too self-indulgent? There was, as noted in the introduction, literally a man in a Viking hat storming the US Capitol—a real-world mirror of Stormcloak rebels in the game itself. However, I found it difficult, if not impossible to avoid my own context in this analysis. Narration is, at its core, the arrangement of temporalities; shifting and organizing narrative time and its occurrences into a desired shape to elicit meaning. That shifting of temporalities occurs in both my own life and in the game’s fictional spaces. In *Possible Worlds*, Ruth Ronen states that temporality is “a major organizing principle” (1994, 207) and goes on to organize the study of narrative time in print literature through three different lenses:

1. Narrative theories that identify the temporality of fiction with the narrativity of fictional texts.
2. Narrative theories that primarily attribute the temporality of fiction to the temporality of events and states of affairs projected or constructed by the fictional text.
3. Narrative theories that primarily attribute the temporality of fiction to the temporality of the textual medium and to verbal means of presentation. (Ronen 1994, 206).

I find these three levels to be helpful, albeit imperfect, focal points to discuss the different kinds of “time” in games, with a primary adaptation focused on the third lens’ focus on text and verbal presentation. In adapting these lenses for games, we can consider “time” in games to operate on the three levels of: temporality in the game world (the ways time is constructed to pass within the game—the representation of a fictional temporal dimension); narrativization of events within the diegetic world (the progress of events within the fiction—in the sense of both *fabula* and *syuzhet*); and the performative activation of game temporality (the time and context of player engagement with diegetic

and extradiegetic game elements—the physical passing of time spent playing the game). These are the base languages of time in a video game.

To illustrate via *Skyrim*, the temporality of the game world would consist of the ways that hours, days, and months pass within the game, the day/night cycles, and the traits of the game world during those cycles, such as NPC locations or the amount of time it takes to travel from location to location. The narrativization of events would point towards in-game historical events as well as the player's own *skaz*-esque narration of their journeys in the province of Skyrim, such as the order in which players choose to engage in quests, the causal chain of actions that lead from event to event, and diegetic context made known to the player (learning the history of Skyrim through books, stories from NPCs, or environmental storytelling). The performative activation of game temporality would point towards the amount of time I have spent playing the game, the physical engagement and manipulation of my body to play the game, and the limitations and influences of my life that impact how and when I can play. According to Christopher Hanson in his comprehensive *Game Time*, these temporalities are separate while intertwined and “allow us to experience time in new and previously inaccessible ways” (Hanson 2018, 3). In particular, the ways that players “exercise agency over these various temporal structures via pausing and saving mechanisms or gameplay elements that make temporal manipulation and navigation a core gameplay mechanic” (Hanson 2018, 3), which to me, reflects on their narrative structure.

In this chapter, I will discuss the structuring of time in the game, the ways players can manipulate and alter time during their gameplay, as well as the shifting context of play which has deeply impacted the cultural and political rhetorics of the game. In a Bakhtinian sense, the authorial narration of a video game like *Skyrim* actually is its temporality and the structure of time in the game—both in the sense of the ways time manifests and functions in the game, but also in how a

player spends time to engage with it. Authorial narration, according to Bakhtin, is the refracted purpose or ideological bend of the author as it is indirectly represented within the text. Because there is no single author within a video game, authorial narration takes on something more nebulous, but equally important to the gameplay experience as traditional textual authorial narration. By exploring the queering of time both in and out of the diegetic world, a different form of narration comes into contact with spatial and social elements of gameplay and creates a unique dialogic language, one specific to video game.

Time to Play

Qualities of time vary from game to game and in different ways, not just in the ways that they refract ideology or intention, but also in the ways they are manipulated by players through the act of play. Our awareness of the game as something playable encourages us to test its limits—we learn the various rules of time and space in a game by bumping into them. In “Introduction to Game Time,” one of the earliest essays on temporality in video games, Jesper Juul proposes a model of game time consisting of:

Game state: The state of the game at a given time.

Play time: The time used by the player to play the game.

Event Time: The time of the events in the game.

Mapping: The process of claiming that what the player does is also something in Event time; a projection of the play time onto event time.

Speed: The relation between the play time and the event time.

Fixation: The historical time of the event time, if any.

Cut scenes: When the event time is constructed through narration (i.e., told rather than played). (Juul 2014, 139)

Juul’s divisions of time provide a helpful vocabulary with which to discuss the kinds of temporal tensions in *Skyrim*. As a queered temporality, *Skyrim* offers little in terms of fixed event times or cut scenes. The vast majority of time spent in *Skyrim* consists of play time, mapping, and quest-focused

event time. Speed of time in *Skyrim*'s fictional setting is softly authorial, in terms of its control over events within the game—for the most part, events are independent of time passing in the game and the player is able to wait game state days in mere seconds of actual play time at will. In terms of Ronen's three lenses (1994, 206), we can divide Juul's more video game-precise terms into the following:

1. Narrative theories that identify the temporality of fiction with the narrativity of fictional texts.
 - Event time; Fixation; Cut scenes
2. Narrative theories that primarily attribute the temporality of fiction to the temporality of events and states of affairs projected or constructed by the fictional text.
 - Game state; Mapping
3. Narrative theories that primarily attribute the temporality of fiction to the temporality of the textual medium and to verbal means of presentation.
 - Play time; Speed

As you can see, Juul's game-specific terms become more game-focused projections of Ronen's temporalities in fiction. However, three of the terms fall under the banner of diegetic narration—these kinds of temporalities have specific story implications in the crafting of a narrative, but this is not to say that the other dimensions of game time are not important. In fact, we can connect some of the most unique elements of video game narration to them. Game state and mapping are both fundamental processes to the playing of a game—they are portions of Nitsche's play plane and part of what makes playing an active process.

Pulling on threads of Bolter's 1984 work in *Turing's Man: Western Culture in the Computer Age*, Ursula Heise argues that due to the "acceleration of normal temporality, computer use immerses the individual in a 'hyper-present' of sorts, a hyper-intensified immediacy that immerses the user's attention on a rapid succession of micro-events and thereby makes it more difficult to envision even the short-term past or future" (Heise 1997, 26). This makes time compress and speed up, in many

cases—the minutes and hours of Skyrim, already accelerated, become a shaping formality more than a defining trait of the world. This speed of time in Skyrim, combined with the number of hours a player actually engages with the game in terms of play time, makes time pass quickly. However, the speed of time feels irrelevant to the Dragonborn, who might be narratively expected to obey the fictional demands of a crisis, nevertheless has all the time in the world. The game has a beginning, but functionally, no end. This makes the temporal rhythms of the game—on any level mentioned by Ronen or Juul—different than in other forms of narrative media.

This focus on the ever-present has two impacts. First, it builds a timelessness of space that functionally cannot end, which disrupts heteronormative temporalities. But secondly, it contradicts queer optimist readings of time such as Muñoz's here:

Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, and in the face of the here and now's totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there*" (Muñoz 2009, 1. Emphasis original)

Yet all we have in a video game is the here and now. Time in most games, such as Skyrim, is always trapped in the here and now; very few games continue to progress or change without the players' influence. Very few games continue onwards when the game is turned off⁴³. It makes the here and now, as Muñoz refers to it, become all-encompassing and transform into the prison house he describes. However, this does not un-queer time in games, as from a narrative perspective, games have a very important feature that queers them even as they are permanently imprisoned in the here and now.

⁴³ Some famous exceptions include the Animal Crossing series, which continues in its own domestic patterns and rhythms in real-time.

It is this permanent now-ness that results in the unique queerness of narrative game time. Pointing towards Walter Benjamin, Frank Kermode, and Peter Brooks, Heise explains that narrative time is often molded by the inescapability of death; by finding retrospective meaning in the plot following the end of a story, narrative is “a means of bestowing meaning on one’s life because it provides the possibility of looking back at life from beyond the ending” (Heise 1997, 48). However, death, in many games, is just part of the narrative—something erased over and remade time and time again. In *Skyrim*, the only consequence for death is the reformation of time to the last save file. The world is reset to a time and place of your choosing (although due to carelessness or forgetfulness on the players’ part, it is often not considered a time and place of choosing, as it may not be the ideal time or place to restart from). Narrative time without the lurking threat of an ending becomes something that is simultaneously fast and slow, without a meaningful ending. It creates the ability to consider a murky kind of future, but the game itself functions without a story’s ending, only a temporal end—that is, it operates on Ronen’s first and third lenses but ignores the second. Completing the main questlines—the main story beats—does not conclude the game. In many linear RPGs, completing the main storyline ends the game, but the player is allowed to restart and rejoin the game in the moments before they finish the story. This means the ending is never within reach from a narrative perspective, and any time an ending is reached, it is erased and undone for the purpose of continued play, looping in a cycle that only ends when the player turns the game off for the last time. However, *Skyrim* is not a linear RPG, but an open-world RPG. The difference being that in a linear RPG, the narrative and gameplay are both set to particular patterns and steps, much as linearity functions in any narrative system.

In *Skyrim*, this is not the case. As an open-world game, the only required linearity is between individual steps in a questline, but there is no linearity between different questlines. It is perhaps

easiest to think of *Skyrim* as a nexus point of many interruptible narratives that are joined into a larger narrative by play time, by the temporality of the presentation of game elements. Questlines act as narrative prompts but are always narrated by the player's own stream-of-consciousness kind of player-narration to themselves. That is to say, the player can finish the main questline, save the world, and then continue on their regular life uninterrupted. The temporality of the fiction is uninterrupted by the ending of the diegesis—that is to say, the narrative ends but narration does not. The only temporal endings in *Skyrim* are of attention span or interest, not narrative. Judith Roof states that:

Without the expectation of an ending, we have difficulty discerning a story, its pleasures, terrors, lessons, its making sense of things, its usefulness as catharsis or panacea. If there is no end we normally identify as an end—orgasm, death, marriage, victory, salvation, the production of something (insight, a child, another story, the story itself, knowledge, identity)—we ask, “Is that all there is?” and regard the apparently truncated story as ironic, as an unsatisfying failure, as a metanarrative commentary on narrative, or as no story at all. (1996, 6).

These disruptions to time's linear march and the binary of beginning and end act to destabilize and denaturalize time in video games. To go without ending, in chrononormative measurements, means to carry on in a space and time in between the moments of time that are believed to instill meaning. The straightforward narrative of progress no longer operates, although the narrative of improvement seen in RPGs still moves the player towards greater power. That is to say, the player continues to level, improve their skills, and gather resources, but it does not reward them in the same ways anymore. All the gold in *Skyrim* becomes meaningless. The relationships the Dragonborn grows can no longer grow deeper⁴⁴. If the Dragonborn has adopted children, they never grow. Their spouse does not react or change as the Dragonborn does. The world is time-locked while still temporal, the

⁴⁴ Relationships can change from a positive or neutral state to a negative one, if the player goes on a killing spree. But this only acts to remove characters from the setting—very few NPCs react to the deaths of their acquaintances or even loved ones.

chrononormative patterns of real life disrupted. As Elizabeth Freeman argues, “queer time emerged from within, alongside, and beyond [the] heterosexually gendered double-time of stasis and progress, intimacy and genealogy” (2010, 23). The queer time of *Skyrim* forces a player to find new pleasures and meaningfulness in the face of a world that simply is not structured to have a place for the Dragonborn; the typical patterns of time and space cannot apply, just as is true for queer people living in a heteronormative-locked society. This kind of queer time in a game, as it turns out, requires a player to inhabit a very particular embodiment, one that is simultaneously lonely, without prescribed purpose, and difficult to negotiate in terms of boundaries.

Privileged Temporalities

The story of *Skyrim* begins on 17th Last Seed, Year 201 of the 4th Era, although the day of the week will change depending on whether or not there is a previous save state of the game. On a new installation without any previous save files, 17th Last Seed is a Sundas. Time, as represented in *Skyrim* as a fictional temporal dimension, is organized into hours, days, and months, much like our own divisions of time in the non-fictional temporal sense. A Tamriel day is 24 hours long. A Tamriel week is seven days long. A Tamriel month is between 28 and 31 days long. A Tamriel year mimics a North American calendar, with the names of months altered. For example, the Tamriel year begins with Morning Star, a winter month with 31 days, mirroring January in the Northern Hemisphere. Weekdays have their Gregorian counterparts (Sundas/Sunday, Morndas/Monday, etc.), with an interesting exception for Saturday’s analogous day, Loredas, which seemingly mimics the Norwegian

Lørdag and *Laurdag*, the Danish and Swedish *Lördag*, and Finnish *Lauantai*—all derived from the Old Norse *Laugardagr* (“*Lore:Calendar 2021*”; Wolf and Mueller-Vollmer 2018, 125)⁴⁵.

I can’t think of a single way any of this impacts the Dragonborn whatsoever.

The shaping of time into days has very little significance to the Dragonborn—nor does the arrangement of time into months, seasons, or years. Day and night cycles matter only in that most shops are open from 8am to 8pm and a small number of random or scripted events can only take place in the evening or daytime. Yet these divisions of time barely organize or structure the Dragonborn’s life; to the Dragonborn, there is only the Past and the Now, with Now becoming the Past as the player explores the world. The player’s identity as the Dragonborn overrides much of, if not all, the temporal structures of the world. The player can change the time of day or night freely by using the “wait” option for hours upon hours in the game with the press of a button; if a shop is closed, you can always just break in and take what you need (although the selling of found items are, for the most part, limited to operating hours or 24-hour merchants.) Sleeping and eating, which bracket and organize the daily tasks of people in real life, are completely optional to the Dragonborn. Indeed, we cannot ignore “the central role of identity in shaping understandings and experiences of temporality” (Hanson 3). Our privilege and power as the Dragonborn overrides much of the hum-drum and banal requirements of everyday life and its grasp on temporal rhythms. Freeman argues that:

. . . flesh is bound into socially meaningful embodiment through temporal regulation: binding is what turns mere existence into a form of mastery in a process I’ll refer to as chrononormativity, or the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity. And I mean that people are bound to one another, engrouped,

⁴⁵ *Laugardagr* means “Bath Day,” implying pre-medieval Scandinavian cultures—i.e., Vikings, bathed at least once a week, which is more often than many cultures at the time were able to (or interested in). Wolf and Mueller-Vollmer gesture towards the traditions of saunas and the upcoming day of worship as suggestions that *Laugardagr* was a day of rest and personal care.

made to feel coherently collective, through particular orchestrations of time: Dana Luciano has termed this chronobiopolitics, or “the sexual arrangement of the time of life” of entire populations (2010, 3).

Applying the concept specifically to games, Bonnie Ruberg argues that chrononormativity in games take shape in multiple ways, but notably in “the internalization and reproduction of social norms that exist outside the game” (2019, 191) and that “chrononormativity names a set of foundational logics that have come to shape how games are designed and experienced in relation to time” (2019, 192). Seeing as the Tamriel calendar follows the Gregorian/Julian calendar so closely, it implies that the structuring of time is much the same as pre-medieval cultures despite the Gregorian calendar’s genesis in the 16th century and the Julian calendar even earlier (“Gregorian Calendar”), despite the clear modernizations. The patterns of life in a Gregorian calendar also follow these logics as the theological and religious roots of the Gregorian calendar assists in structuring time to best suit heterosexual logics, or the chronobiopolitics, as coined by Dana Luciano in 2008’s *Arranging Grief*. According to Luciano, the straight nuclear family, heterosexual reproduction, and heteronormative child-rearing are the defining elements of chrononormative time. Maximum productivity. Collectively organized temporally and spatially into acceptable chrononormative and chronobiological units of life and meaning. As such, the predominant use of time in *Skyrim* is loosely organized in such a sense as well—farming seasons each year, working hours and hours off work each day, and patterns of childhood, adulthood, marriage, and death throughout the years.

So, how does game time work, given that these factors matter so little to the Dragonborn? In real life, queer folks grapple with the realities of heteronormative time their whole lives; queer time is formed as a reaction and rejection of the normative logics of heterosexual time. While time in *Skyrim* is queered in the sense that the player has no obligation to these heteronormative logics, the ways that the player is removed from these times is not one of rejection or oppression as it often is in real life,

but privilege. Our embodiment as the Dragonborn shifts our perceptions of and our interactions with time.

The Dragonborn's identity is quite fluid in many ways; aside from being The Dragonborn, there is nothing else that a player must be. The player can take on the body of a heterosexual or queer person. They can be male or female—there are no options for nonbinary genders, unfortunately. There is some traditional queer representation in the game—marriage is an option, and gender has no bearing on the relationships available as spouses to the Dragonborn. Players can hold a short wedding ceremony to solemnize their union, after which the spouse can move into the player's home, if they have one—otherwise, the spouse character will simply continue to spend time where the player would usually find them, such as an inn, shop, or mapped pathway through a town. The NPC's dialog to the player becomes more romantic on occasion, but the dialog never implies a sexual relationship, leaving time for the Dragonborn to be asexual and queer in terms of their sexual identity. But this is queer representation by absentia rather than genuine queer representation. As is typical, heterosexuality is constant unless proven otherwise.

The game's most heteronormative structuring comes in the form of an expansion pack, *Hearthstone*, where players can build three modular homes in the wilds of Skyrim and may adopt up to two of Skyrim's orphans, if they wish. Reproduction and raising children are some of the most meaningful and demanding uses of time in heterosexual logics, one that is denied to many queer people, whether from infertility or the sheer amount of red tape that those queer relationships face when trying to adopt. Edelman argues that children (as used politically and generally, i.e., "think of the children") are simply: "the prop of the secular theology on which our social reality rests: the secular theology that shapes at once the meaning of our collective narratives and our collective narratives of meaning" (2004, 12). Children act as a major developmental milestone in

heteronormative society and often times, a measure of progress through life—so much so that people go through great length to conceive or adopt. And yet, the Dragonborn can include this marker of heteronormativity and meaning in their life without issue. At its easiest, the Dragonborn can simply approach an orphan on the street and tell the child that they can live at their house, no questions asked. The child now refers to the player as “Ma/Mama” or “Pa/Papa.”⁴⁶ Adoption complete. Parenthood achieved. Futurity secured.

Official adoptions are an option via the orphanage in Riften—seemingly the only orphanage in the entire province. Whether or not orphanages and formal adoption were really part of the actual medieval era is less important than the neomedievalist inclusion of a formalized adoption process within the game; to include this as an option in a game about roaming the countryside and killing dragons seems a bit odd. But to adopt a child, the Dragonborn must only assure the woman in charge of the children's care that they aren't an assassin or thief and indicate that they have a home where the child can live. Granted, the player must assassinate the orphan's previous cruel and abusive caretaker beforehand, making the option to select the Dragonborn's occupation complicated, as they have options such as "Adventurer," "The Dragonborn," "Assassin," etc. If the player has completed questlines for The Companions (traditional Nord mercenary group) or has reached a high level of acclaim as a member of the College of Winterspring (magic school), or claims to be the Dragonborn, the caretaker is thrilled to hand over a child. She is indifferent to "mercenary" or "adventurer" but still allows you to adopt. If you say you're an assassin or thief, she sends you away for “wasting [her] time.” Common, lower-class occupations are acceptable but not desired. As long as you don't admit to being a murderer or thief, you can adopt. And, if all else fails, you can just ask a kid on the street to

⁴⁶ Boys refer to their parent as "Ma" or "Pa" and girls call them "Mama" or "Papa."

be your child—something utterly not allowed in contemporary times that seems more plausible in the medieval/neomedieval.

Players may engage in other traditionally domestic behaviors such as cooking or gardening, but the first thing that happens when a player builds a home is an NPC character appears to become the steward of the home, excusing the Dragonborn from any domestic necessities or heteronormative uses of their time—unless they choose to engage in them. But as “Domesticity is a particular tempo, a way of living time rather than merely a relationship to the space of the home” (Freeman 2010, 39), the home becomes a drop-off point for loot more than a place of rest or belonging, even if the player has a spouse or children. The expectation is that the player will not be at home but will be off adventuring and saving the world. The home is not a domestic space, despite traditional markers of heteronormative time.

And away from heteronormative time, the Dragonborn creates their own communities and networks, identity, and time within Skyrim. They make allies and enemies, develop skills and reputation based on their interests, and engage in time and space without the kinds of repercussions or expectations that would be part of a heteronormative society. While the life of a knight-errant or nobleman in medieval society might have been free of such heteronormative expectations, the modern-day players are subject to modern-day heteronormative time; video games like these represent a fictional escape into a life free from these expectations. On the other hand, in real life, queer time allows queer folks the opportunity to create meaning in their lives that are otherwise denied to them by their bodies, by society, and by time itself.

However, the in-game representation of non-normative life and queer time builds a problematic relationship that reproduces a traditionally patriarchal white male ideal. Queer time is often the result of rejection, oppression, or wider societal contexts. While the fantasy of living

without heteronormative expectations is appealing to many, it is not a choice made by many queer people; a number of queer folks are thrown into queer time unwillingly. Edelman famously draws on the Lacanian death drive, which “names what the queer, in the order of the social, is called forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every form of social viability” (2004, 9). Meanwhile, Halberstam gives the example of queer time during the AIDS crisis resulting in queer folks expecting shorter lifespans and living “faster” as a result (2005, 2-4), but:

. . . even as it emerges from the AIDS crisis, [queer time] is not only about compression and annihilation; it is also about the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing” (2014, 2)

So, while queer time is, in its positive light, a freedom, it is not necessarily a desired one. Queer folks abandoned by their families and queer lives cut short by political posturing, physical violence, and legal inaction, are all subject to queer time just as well as the “liberated” queer who enjoys the ability to choose a different future than they otherwise would have still living in heterosexual time. What we have access to as the Dragonborn is akin to the “liberated” queer’s experience of queer time.

The emergence of a “liberated” queer in the early 2000s—typically the gay white cisman whose acceptance into popular culture often hinged on their “freedom” from typical masculinities and heterosexual time—begins to connect into an uncomfortable position, however. Brian McNair defines gay liberation as “to achieve equality within mainstream heterosexual society, or to win acceptance for a separate gay sphere outside of it” (2002, 131). The emergence of the “Very Straight Gay” or “normal gay⁴⁷” and the effeminized campy gay characters that emerged from 2000s era television, such as the American sitcom *Will & Grace* and reality TV shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*,

⁴⁷ Peter Nardi argues that: “Although rejecting hypermasculinity and effeminacy, many gay men embrace a ‘very straight gay’ style by enacting both hegemonic masculinity and gay masculinity in their daily lives.” (6).

both idolized the white gay man as the dealer of desire between straight men and women as well as normalized the upper-middleclass urban gay man. To straight media, gay men held the secrets to straight women and translated women's unknowable desires for straight men to access sexual partners (see Schiappa, Edward and Hewes 2006; Hart 2004; Pullen 2007). However, as Thomas Linneman argues:

The gender order remains stable, with hegemonic masculinities firmly ensconced at the top, because American culture does a thorough job of connecting gay masculinities to a more broadly subordinated gender form: femininities. While many gay men may no longer act effeminately, they remain feminized. . . . Gender may be done to him by others. Even if a gay man does not engage in effeminate behavior, he still may be feminized by others Some of this feminizing is accomplished by heterosexual men who, as arbiters of hegemonic masculinity, hold an interest in clarifying this gender divide. (2008, 584).

So, while the liberated gay is still subject to homophobia and harmful stereotypes, he holds his place at the top of the hierarchy of permissible queers, the few that are allowed the perceived liberation of heteronormative acceptance. The fact that white cis gayness is the most acceptable form of gayness continues to mirror white supremacist and patriarchal demands, despite not being part of chrononormative expectations.

This brings us back to the rest of us queers—the ones who aren't upper-middle class, gay white cismen. Queer time for the “unliberated” queer is not often a choice, but a necessity. But yet the rhetorics of “liberation” and “freedom,” especially in regards to queer times, are invariably structured around normative times, which are themselves deeply structured around race, class, and ethnicity. In *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom*, Elisabeth Robin Anker explores the specifically American “freedom,” explaining that:

Americanized interpretations of freedom as self-reliance, as unconstrained agency, and as unbound subjectivity. It combines these interpretations together as normative expressions of a sovereign subject, one who obeys no other authority but one's own, who can determine the future and control the vagaries of contingency through sheer strength of will. Freedom requires the capacity for final authority over the time of the nation and aims to shore up boundaries of territories and bodies to make them

impermeable to the influence of others. Freedom as this form of sovereign subjectivity seems to require control or mastery over the external world for its full exercise. Freedom, in this normative definition, is often equated with both individual and state sovereignty. (Anker 2014, 9).

Jasbir Puar notes that this kind of “freedom” is “foundational tenet of American exceptionalism” (2007, 23) which not only abandons a number of queer populations, but also encourages and reinforces sexual exceptionalism, which he calls homonationalism, defined as “a regulatory script not only of normative gayness, queerness, or homosexuality, but also of the racial and national norms that reinforce these sexual subjects” (2007, 2). To the queer folks with the socio-economic resources to access this sexual exceptionalism—namely white gay cisgender men and to a lesser degree, white lesbian cisgender women—is at the expense of racially marginalized queers. Queer time for marginalized queer folk is very different from the queer time of the sexually exceptioned. Drawing on Sara Ahmed in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), Puar continues to say that:

the material, cultural, and social capital and resources that might delimit “access” to queerness, [suggest] that queerness can be an elite cosmopolitan formulation contingent upon various regimes of mobility. Ironically, “those that have access” to such cultural capital and material resources may constitute the very same populations that many would accuse of assimilation, living out queerness in the most apolitical or conservatively political ways. (2007, 22)

White liberation fantasies, such as what players experience in *Skyrim*, wherein the queered subject is “free” to choose the life they wish, often does not undermine or resist heteronormativity. Puar argues it actually supports it, as to be a “free” queer in this sense often requires the oppression of BIPOC and gender-queer people. The liberated and free queer fantasy often comes down to the freedom to live a normative life without living a straight one, the “assimilated” queer (2007, 9). Muñoz too warns that “mere inclusion in a corrupt and bankrupt social order” only acts to limit queer ability to “critique the larger ideological regime that represents ‘heteronormativity’ as something desirable, natural, and good. . . assimilationist gay politics posits an ‘all’ that is in fact a few: queers with enough access to capital to imagine a life integrated within North American capitalist culture” (Muñoz 2009, 20).

So, while *Skyrim* operates following a queer temporality in the sense that it exists without the social expectations of modern heteronormative society (as experienced and understood as natural by its players), it is important to recognize that it is a place of freedom dependent on notions of white exceptionalism and nationalism. While Chris Patternson argues that “this ‘open’ form of freedom also carries the potential to counteract neoliberal notions of freedom defined through the freedom to choose one’s own route of self-optimization” (2020, 4), a role-playing video game is mechanically about exactly that—finding a pleasurable pathway to become the most optimized version of the self. The RPG genre is structured as a narrative of self-improvement, but that self-improvement takes the form of collecting and consolidating power for individual purposes—much like capitalism itself. In commenting on David Harvey’s *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Halberstam states that:

. . . time is organized according to the logic of capital accumulation, but those who benefit from capitalism in particular experience this logic as inevitable, and they are therefore able to ignore, repress, or erase the demands made on them and others by an unjust system. (2014, 7).

This means that even when free of the heteronormative demands of time and identity, the RPG is a genre that perpetuates capitalism, which oppresses anyone who lives outside the white, patriarchal norms. Yes, it’s fun for most players to be able to play with power and to experience the top of the food chain, so to speak. But as the Dragonborn’s journey is narrated dialogically through the player’s own form of narration, this narrative structure is always in dialogue with capitalism and its connection to a complicity in white supremacy and colonization. It is a voice always present in *Skyrim*, a dialogic-like aura resonating throughout every *Time*. When *Skyrim* engages more directly with white supremacy and colonial violence, this language speaks more and more clearly throughout the times of the game. Freeman, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu, suggests that “institutionally and culturally enforced rhythms, or timings, shape flesh into legible, acceptable embodiment” (2010, 4), and we see this shaping of time and embodiment within the game. The queered time in *Skyrim* is a

temporality where players enjoy a lack of societal convention and to escape the mundanities of normative times. The freedom of queered time is one of the fantasies of an open-world game and a privilege of the Dragonborn's position.

The Invisible Hands of Time

The queerness of time in *Skyrim*—the independence, the escapism, the varying speeds and rhythms of the game—are shaped by a particular and unique form of narration in games. Here, I adapt a second of Bakhtin's stylistic unities. What Bakhtin refers to as authorial narration in novels is not missing from video games, but it is altered in how it is encountered. To contextualize, I borrow the overly formal *syuzhet* and *fabula* from the early Russian Formalist Circles to help discuss the ways temporality narrates a kind of meaning in *Skyrim* that resonates with the queer nature of time as represented in the game.

Fabula and *syuzhet* are terms that divide a story, plot, and narrative. *Fabula* refers to "basic story material" and *syuzhet* refers to "plot" (Prince 1997, 526). Therefore, one would look at the *syuzhet* as a series of events which are selected or curated (narrated) from a larger system or constellation of possible events, compared to the events of the story as they would appear in chronological order, the *fabula*. While the terms *fabula* and *syuzhet* both come to European and colonial-settler narratology from Russian Formalism circles, Bakhtin himself would not have applied the terms, as they are deeply finalizing categories. The livingness of the word and its dialogics cannot, in a Bakhtinian sense, be limited to one defined, permanent, and final meaning. I find the terms to be helpful in a video game narrative, however, as the entire game itself can be understood as a *fabula* and the particular course of action a player takes to be their *syuzhet* (at least, in an adapted sense for games.) The narration of each player's *syuzhet*, however, is something much more interesting and dialogic in the case of games. I consider the particular dialogic-like language of time in *Skyrim* to be

akin to a form of novelist narration rather than simply the ways that the plot pieces are arranged by an author of varying degrees of absenteeism.

In the previous chapter, I argued that the exploration of navigable space is a crucial dialogic of spatial narrative in video games. The multiple roles and functions of environmental storytelling, such as the presentation of affordances, the formation of context, or the framing of narrative sequences—replace more traditional indexical and informant functions from novels or written forms of narrative. But these spatial indices and informant cues seen in environmental storytelling are activated by the player’s own navigation of space, regardless if that navigation is free or framed. Players narrate their own interactions and choices as part of gameplay, they also replace part of a traditional novelistic narrative structure with their own. In Bakhtinian terms, this is player-narration of the open-world RPG and acts as a form of place-making by the player themselves.

But just as space implicates time (and vice-versa), player-narration is implicated and shaped by something more than the player’s activation. In novels, what Bakhtin calls *skaz* (and I call player-narration) is a performance of structure and voice, but not by an author directly—an author who has been suspiciously absent in my discussions of game narration. Bakhtin argues authorial narration is when authors insert their own perceptions, ideas, and politics into the diegetic world not through direct means, but refracted ones. Bakhtin states:

The relationship of the author to a language conceived as the common view is not static—it is always found in a state of movement and oscillation that is more or less alive (this sometimes is a rhythmic oscillation): the author exaggerates, now strongly, now weakly, one of another aspect of the “common language,” sometimes abruptly exposing its inadequacy to its object and sometimes, on the contrary, becoming one with it, maintaining an almost imperceptible distance, sometimes even directly forcing it to reverberate with his own ‘truth’ which occurs when the author completely merges his own voice with the common view. (1981, 302).

The self-narration of players then, is constantly being shaped by something indirect but deeply influential. The author arranges the representation of the narrator to present the story they intend to tell, but the author also arranges the narrator themselves. So, while a narrator is arranging how we understand the story, the narrator is themselves arranged by the author, these two languages coming together to form the basics of the story's syuzhet. Yet it is important to understand that the authorial intent of this narration matters little; the meaning is placed in the hands of the players' syuzhet, and the authorial narration shapes the temporality of the game experience. However, the authorial narration shapes the fabula, whereas the player cannot. This is the key element of the double-voicedness introduced in the previous chapter: the relationship between author, narrator, and narrative.

A very strong dialogical tension or resonance in novels, then, is the difference between refracted authorial narration and direct authorial narration. They are different languages and different belief systems, and realizing and mapping the tensions between the stylistics of authorial narration and other forms of narration “permits authorial intentions to be realized in such a way that we can acutely sense their presence at every point in the work” as we note how “the author utilizes now one language, now another, in order to avoid giving himself up wholly to either of them; he makes use of this verbal give-and-take, this dialogue of languages at every point in his work” (Bakhtin 1981, 314). The speech of narrators, then, is “‘nondirect speaking’—not *in* language but *through* language, through the linguistic medium of another—and consequently through a refraction of authorial intentions” (Bakhtin 1981, 313. Emphasis original).

The difference between authorial narration and the general narration of a story is complex and subtle. The intention of the author comes through the general narration as opposed to direct authorial input, which might be found in a foreword or acknowledgement section of a novel, rather

than in the narration itself. Direct authorial intent is rarely actually part of the narrative; instead, the intent of the author comes through the narrator in a refracted way. This difference between refracted and unrefracted narration is crucial to understanding what is and what is not authorial narration.

To understand this in games, first I will explain this concept in novels, using Voltaire's *Candide* to assist as an example. I selected this text purely because of the significant differences between narrator, character, and authorial voices; the narrator is a character with their own distinct voice, crafted by the author to present a particular view on the events of the story. So where does the author's direct narration occur, if not in instances such as these? It is more abstract. The voice of the author in the case of *Candide* is seen through the logic of having developed such a narrator in the first place.

The narrator in *Candide* can be described as jovial, optimistic, and naive, even when describing atrocities, as seen in the following passage in Chapter 3:

Never was anything so gallant, so well accoutered, so brilliant, and so finely disposed as the two armies. The trumpets, fifes, hautboys, drums, and cannon made such harmony as never was heard in Hell itself. The entertainment began by a discharge of cannon, which, in the twinkling of an eye, laid flat about 6,000 men on each side. The musket bullets swept away, out of the best of all possible worlds, nine or ten thousand scoundrels that infested its surface. The bayonet was next the sufficient reason of the deaths of several thousands. The whole might amount to thirty thousand souls. Candide trembled like a philosopher, and concealed himself as well as he could during this heroic butchery. (Voltaire 1998, 6).

The narrator here is naive and cheerful to the point of callousness, which is their character throughout the novel as Candide travels around the world and develops from a character equally naive and uncaringly optimistic into a character more tempered by his experiences towards caution. The juxtaposition between the narrator, the Candide we meet at the start of the novella, and the Candide

we have seen develop over the course of the novel, acts out Voltaire's own voice, rather than just the character of the narrator, speaking to readers through the double-voiced narration of the novel. Voltaire's frustration with Enlightenment era philosophy is made clear through both the events of the novella, the reactions of Candide as the main character, as well as the narrator's descriptions and reactions. The unrefracted authorial intention in both the quoted passages is implied, not directly narrated. What we see in the novel's narration is the refracted intention of the author—to satirize Optimism philosophy—through the language used by the narrator, who is very distinct from Voltaire. So, there are two distinct messages, two separate voices speaking at the same time, at all moments of authorial narration, in novels.

But it is not so clear-cut in games narration. Part of this comes down to who is considered an author, a question which is complicated in a video game due to the studio nature of AAA games. More than 100-some developers, artists, directors, writers, and more, all contributed to the creation of *Skyrim* in particular (Sinclair, 2002). Even if we consider the 100 people who worked on *Skyrim* to all be authors, we must remember the difference between refracted and unrefracted. All of their ideas and intentions are part of this work and it impacts on narration. But in games, we do not have such a clear delineation of narrator, author, and characters.

If the story of a game is crafted partially from the player's narration as they navigate space, as I have established in the previous chapter, then I would argue that the navigation of space is actually narrated by an authorial narrator due to the embodied nature of player-narration. Drawing from Sara Ahmed's concept of queer phenomenology, authorial narration could also be called the narration of orientation. Derek Burrill notes that the body, as discussed by Ahmed, is crucially understudied within game studies; he believes that bodies and embodiment is a critical intervention of queer game studies within game studies as a whole (2017, 30.) I believe that to understand temporal languages

within a video game, we must consider the wheres, whats, whys, and hows of our bodies over time—both as players of the game and as acting bodies within the game. As Ahmed writes:

What does it mean to be orientated? How do we begin to know or to feel where we are, or even where we are going, by lining ourselves up with the features of the grounds we inhabit, the sky that surrounds us, or the imaginary lines that cut through maps? How do we know which way to turn to reach our destination? (2006, 6).

These kinds of questions guide my examination of authorial narration; at what times and places are we oriented, gestured towards something, guided or herded? What ways are we, as players, temporally and locationally bound? As we'll see in the upcoming example, authorial narration acts to direct the embodied experience of players as they form their own self-narration. In video games, the most direct gestures of orientation occur during cutscenes, where the temporal shaping of experience is overtly controlled by another dialogic language—the player's narration interrupted by a sudden change in direction or even perspective, guided by another voice within the game.

There are few cutscenes in *Skyrim*, but one of the most instructive in terms of authorial narration is the very first one, the beginning of the game.

The first thing that happens is darkness. Everything is black and I can't see anything. But slowly, I begin to hear things. The sounds of horses and wheels rolling across a well-worn cobblestone path slowly builds, and everything shifts from black to a light grey and into visual consciousness. An armored figure facing away from me comes into focus—the driver of a cart, a human man who does not turn around or speak to me as I wake. I don't think he noticed that I woke up, and moreover, I don't think he cares.

Pine trees dusted with snow line the road, reaching up towards a dreary grey sky. The cart beneath me is a rough wood with distinct grain. An armored guard on horseback rides behind you, and a cart similar to the one I am in is visible just ahead. There are four, maybe six prisoners in the cart, their worn-looking blue quilted armor clearly contrasting to the clothing worn by the guards—the red armor is more detailed and cleanly cut than the by the prisoners. Another armored guard on horseback leads the cart in front. These guards all wear the same armor as each other, a reddish-brown leather with silver scale mail over the shoulders and a leather helmet. A red tunic is visible along the edges of the leather and scale mail.

As I look around, one of the three other people in my cart makes eye contact with me and speaks. He is seated across from me on the cart, wearing the same quilted armor

as the prisoners in the cart in front of me, but up close, I can see the blue tunic underneath and the hints of chainmail at the sleeves. But even close by, the armor is less clean-cut than that worn by the guards.

“Hey, you. You're finally awake. You were trying to cross the border, right?”

He speaks with a strong accent, maybe vaguely Scandinavian or Welsh if you want to hear that, but not actually Scandinavian in the least⁴⁸—more resembling a hodge-podge of broad and strongly emphasized vowel sounds and peculiar inflections on long “o” and “a” sounds. His face is dirty, and his matted blonde hair is braided near his face.

Still looking directly at me, he continues, presumably having my attention now. “Walked right into that Imperial ambush, same as us, and that thief over there.”

At those words, the man seated next to him interjects—presumably the aforementioned thief. He’s a bit cleaner than the first man, although he wears simple plain clothes. He speaks without the same accent as the first man. His voice is higher-pitched than the first, laced with irritation.

“Damn you Stormcloaks. Skyrim was fine until you came along. Empire was nice and lazy. If they hadn't been looking for you, I could've stolen that horse and been halfway to Hammerfell.”

He looks at me and continues, “You there. You and me—we shouldn't be here. It's these Stormcloaks the Empire wants.”

This moment is the first focalization of narrative information in the game, establishing quite a bit within a few pieces of authorial narration. The player learns their geographic location—near the border between the province of Skyrim and its south-west neighbor Hammerfell, which is also near the border with the province of Cyrodiil, which is the seat of Imperial power in Tamriel. Near three different borders makes this an area of political conflict and tension to begin with, combined with information of your own capture at this ambush by Imperial troops implies your character was attempting to enter the province illegally, avoiding established checkpoints and laws. Your character

⁴⁸ Players will begin to understand to be that of rural Nords, often from north-eastern Skyrim. To my ear, he does not have a perceivable accent, so he likely has a midwestern American accent. As an American from Minnesota, well-known for its peculiar accent with long O and A sounds, I can vouch it is not a Minnesotan accent at all.

never explains why, though. Additionally, at this point not even three minutes into the game, the player learns of the conflict between two political factions—the Empire and the rebel Stormcloaks.

The wagon continues slowly on, moving me forwards to something I don't understand yet. The thief in the cart argues with the soldier briefly before turning his attention to the fourth and final man on the cart. "And what's wrong with him, huh?"

The man in question is different from everyone else nearby in several ways. He is cleaner, face unmarked by dirt and clothes untouched by grime and his shoulder-length blond hair is combed back from his face instead of cut short or braided to keep it from his face. Unlike the other two men on the cart, he actually appears dressed for the snowy environment—a thick fur covers his shoulders over his long-sleeved shirt, which stands out noticeably from the thief and soldier's bare arms. He is clearly visually marked as a member of an upper class compared to the rest of the surrounding soldiers or the thief. But the two most notable differences about his appearance are his lack of armor and the white cloth tied across his mouth, gagging him.

"Watch your tongue. You're speaking to Ulfric Stormcloak, the true High King," the soldier angrily responds to the thief.

The name is familiar—he mentioned it a minute ago. The thief is not happy with the news, though. He nervously says, "Ulfric? The Jarl of Windhelm? You're the leader of the rebellion. But if they've captured you... Oh gods, where are they taking us?"

Ulfric Stormcloak. *The* Ulfric Stormcloak is there from the very beginning, it turns out. Not even three feet from the player is the man who started the war. But aside from understanding he is important, it does not mean anything to me in particular. However, this is authorial narration at work. The dialogic relationship present already simply by having a “rebel forces” versus an “empire” calls to mind dozens of nondiegetic popular culture examples—*Star Wars*, for example—that populate the player’s perceptions before learning about the civil war at all. We already are primed to believe that empires are bad and rebels are good. So here, the authorial narration of a game is not in its characters or settings. Bakhtin makes an analogy between direct authorial narration to the chisel of a sculptor; this kind of narration “hews out the rough outlines of someone else’s speech, and carves the image of language out of the raw empirical data of speech life” (1981, 358). Continuing this analogy, the

narrator's function within narrative forms is to create the specific, artistic vision of the author; any narrator or voice within the text is a tool for the author's purposes, crafting broad strokes, details, angles, and shapes out of the raw materials of languages. The arrangement of characters during these introductory moments acts to orient the experience and knowledge of the player. This process of arranging my body in this time and space is an act of authorial narration, one that guides me for the rest of the game.

During this entire conversation, the horses have not slowed but the terrain is beginning to thin a bit and I can begin to see hints of a nearby settlement. The inability to escape the situation begins to press onto me as the road becomes more pronounced and intersects with another well-defined road. A guard tower and wall can be seen further ahead and more people join the queue of carts. The soldier and thief continue speaking to one another as a man on a horse rushes past towards the wall and the town beyond it. A soldier shouts after him, "General Tullius, sir! The headsman is waiting!" to which the man who just rushed by responds, "Good. Let's get this over with." While the thief begins to pray to a number of the Empire-approved pantheon of gods, the soldier again demands your attention.

"Look at him, General Tullius, the Military Governor. And it looks like the Thalmor are with him. Damn elves. I bet they had something to do with this."

I don't know that I am an elf yet. I don't turn out to be one of the Thalmor elves—they are a political faction of a different kind of elf than me, as a Wood Elf, I have nothing to do with High Elf politics—but the technicality never makes a difference to the people who demeaningly call me "little elf" or assume I'm a thief. Later on, I wonder what has emboldened this Stormcloak to speak so freely like this.

I look towards General Tullius, seeing an older human man in more sturdy and highly decorated red-and-gold leather armor speaking with two figures in dark robes, presumably the aforementioned "damn elves." These are the first non-human characters I've seen; I just now realize that all the Stormcloaks are humans. And the Imperial soldiers have also all been human. I guess there's some political tension between the Stormcloaks and elves, who seem to be aligned with the Empire against the rebels.

But the chatty Stormcloak soldier across from me continues uninterrupted as the cart is pulled through Helgen and comes to a stop in an open square in the center of the walled city. Several voices speak at once, demanding the prisoners leave the carts. The thief continues to panic, asking, "Why are we stopping?"

The chatty Stormcloak sounds resigned and annoyed with the thief. "Why do you think? End of the line. Let's go. Shouldn't keep the gods waiting for us."

"No! Wait! We're not rebels!" he continues to panic.

"Face your death with some courage, thief," barks the Stormcloak.

Thief: "You've got to tell them! We weren't with you! This is a mistake!"

The Empire soldiers clearly do not care that we are not part of the Stormcloak group. When the thief tries to flee, he is shot dead by multiple archers. The Empire captain sneers, "Anyone else feel like running?"

Even if I did feel like running, the cutscene doesn't let me.

"Wait. You there. Step forward. Who are you?"

Without my control, I exit the cart and walk towards the man addressing me. He looks over a list of prisoners. But he is missing my name—as the thief mentioned on the cart, I was just caught in the ambush by accident. Although the thief was a known and wanted criminal, apparently, I am (conveniently) a complete unknown, and I am brought to a character creation menu that allows me to create and name my own character. And now, this point, I am Nyx the Wood Elf. But I am still bound by this cutscene, the slow authorial narration pushing my feet towards the chopping block.

Nyx obviously does not die at this juncture, escaping her execution and into the nearby forest in the heat of an attack by a dragon—unheard of in modern times here in Skyrim. It is a moment of ancient history suddenly intersecting with the present, but that's also something that Nyx doesn't know, because I don't know that. There is so much I don't know about this world, but what I do know is limited. I know that there are Stormcloaks and Imperials. The Imperials tried to kill me for no reason, the Stormcloaks seem to accept me even though I am an elf, and they don't like elves. A *deus-ex machina* in the form of a dragon saved my life and then I escaped imprisonment, set free to do as I please. But Chris Hanson notes that:

When we play a game, we are aware of ourselves both as individuals and as players. ... we become aware of our presence as players within the confines of the game. Our presence as players is what activates the game and its time structures, binding our presence to a game's temporality" (37).

From this moment onwards, the authorial hands of time are gentle ones, leaving me with too many choices that I don't understand or recognize yet. But one thing is for certain: I have no reason to like the Empire in *Skyrim*. As Kristian A. Bjørkelo argues that:

The game design not only allows the player to pursue a racist or ethno-nationalist agenda, it is even possible to argue that the player is pushed in that direction by the game. The player's sympathy for the freedom fighting Stormcloaks is primed already in the game's opening sequence when the PC is to be executed by the antagonistic Empire. The choice to follow the Stormcloaks once the execution is thwarted by a rampaging dragon seems the obvious choice, and the player is given directions to meet up with a Stormcloak contact. If the player instead decides to follow the Imperial questline at the beginning of the game they soon find themselves into higher level territory that is more dangerous and obviously not meant for low level players. The Stormcloaks, on the other hand, can be found in low level areas of the game, where the player is more capable of dealing with the encounters early on. This way the design pushes the player towards the Stormcloaks.

At this point, I have already been indoctrinated. The authorial narration of the game has, through this cut-scene and tutorial sequence, made the Stormcloaks seem like the good guys and the Empire bad. It seems so straightforward from the point of view of the chopping block. I am left with a side quest option to join the Stormcloaks in Windhelm.

Ambivalent Soldiers

I first played *Skyrim* in the summer of 2012—about six months after its release. Six months later, by *Skyrim*'s one-year anniversary, I had played over 270 hours. In less than six months, I spent a little over eleven days straight of what I referred to as “performative activation of game temporality” at the beginning of the chapter—the time and context of player engagement and the physical passing of time while playing the game. As far as temporality within the game world itself—

the ways time is constructed to pass within the game, Nyx had been adventuring in *Skyrim* for about 318 days⁴⁹.

The year 2012 continued and I kept playing. Barack Obama won the second term of his presidency. Gay marriage was legalized in a few more states and the US Supreme Court was hearing cases that further supported the right for queer people to legally marry⁵⁰. The Sandy Hook school shooting occurred, bringing second amendment rights further into the news cycles. The Syrian civil war, part of the wider Arab Spring movements in the 2010s, was escalating as the government of Bashar al-Assad struck back at protesters so violently that the UN labeled the attacks as war crimes, death tolls reaching 90,000 by 2013 and 250,000 by the “end” of conflicts. Syrian refugees fled by the tens of thousands across the world, stirring increasing racist resistance in the US against immigrants and people of color. And I was in my early 20s, finishing my master’s degree and playing *Skyrim* in a small apartment in Duluth, Minnesota. I lived by myself for the first time, and there was no one to judge me for spending too much time playing video games. *Skyrim* in particular was an escape for me from a world that felt like it was teetering on the edge of hope and hopelessness.

I was frustrated a lot by world events. Things that seemed so straightforward to me were somehow “political”—why was allowing refugees into America, or gay marriage’s legality, even up for debate? Assad’s was clearly an evil government regime and the protesters and refugees deserved safety and freedom. They deserved the democracy they fought for; why were so many people ambivalent about it all? Looking back, I see the naivety and privileged shelter of my life—which I still have in many ways—but I understand my lack of understanding then. I lived in a fragile white community of liberal-thinking but not necessarily liberal-acting people. I understood it was

⁴⁹ A day in *Skyrim* is about 1 hour and 12 minutes of real-time

⁵⁰ The right to legally marry in the US was denied to queer folks until 2015.

complicated, but I didn't understand why it had to be complicated. *Skyrim* gave me a space where it wasn't all so complicated, and it didn't need to be. The civil war I saw in the game, after all, was not so complicated at all. Or at least, it was complicated in a familiar way. The ways that characters spoke, the beliefs they communicated, and the fears they raised within the game were all things I saw in my day-to-day life. But what I didn't see—couldn't see—at the time is that what was familiar to me throughout these issues, both in real life and in the game, were the threads of white supremacist thinking.

In his study of Stormfront, the most visible and longest-lasting public white nationalist website, Kristian A. Bjørkelo notes that there is a fairly typical discussion board for gaming—the conversations taking place are somewhat infrequent and discuss many of the same topics as other gaming forums (2020). However, he also explains that the most discussed and popular conversations are ones about race relations. *Skyrim* has proven fertile grounds for pro-nationalist interpretations by self-identified white supremacists, according to Bjørkelo, who writes that “game studies have mostly focused on games as text and purveyors of racism” (2020). I would argue that it is the act of narration that allows, and even encourages, racist readings of *Skyrim*. Of course, Bethesda did not intentionally craft white nationalist propaganda—white supremacy is so deeply entwined in American nationalism that it leads naturally to the same conclusion, however.

The portions of the games that Bjørkelo, self-identified white supremacists, and myself have all gestured towards as the most pro-white supremacist narrations are in the Civil War plotline, most particularly, following the path of the Stormcloak rebels. The Civil War questline contains two mirrored pathways with what ultimately comes down to the same content with different window-dressings—red armor on your enemies instead of blue or vice-versa but following the same sequence of functions with character-type functions fulfilling the same roles.

Regardless of whether the player joins the rebel Stormcloaks or the Imperial Legion, they go through the same steps at the same locations.

1. The Dragonborn visits the home base of the faction, either Solitude Keep or Windhelm Castle, and encounters the faction general and right-hand helper. The Dragonborn is sent on a quest to retrieve an object of ideological value to the Stormcloaks. The Stormcloaks seek the ancient artifact from the quest to morally legitimize their claim to righteousness, and the Empire seeks the item to prevent the legitimization of the Stormcloaks. Entering a tomb filled with enemy agents, traps, and undead monsters, the Dragonborn finds the relic—an ancient crown—and returns it to the faction leader.
2. Having proven their efficacy in battle, the Dragonborn is then sent as a messenger to the city of Whiterun—the central city of the province, still undecided in terms of which side to take. Pushed into making a decision, the Jarl of Whiterun opts to side with the Legion, and the Dragonborn’s next assignment is to either defend the city from Stormcloak attackers, or to attack and take the city as a Stormcloak. The city is visually sacked either way, smoldering ruins and rubble ever present for the remainder of the game.
3. The Dragonborn then sets off on a questline either called the “Reunification of Skyrim” (if allied with the Empire) or the “Liberation of Skyrim” (if allied with the Stormcloaks). There are parallel quests for both sides over the course of the nine sub-quests, including a mission where you rescue allied agents, delivering false information to an enemy agent while undercover, and ransacking and capturing locations. The goal of both questlines is the same; take over the enemy’s-controlled

towns and military forts in each of the nine Holds of Skyrim, thereby gaining control of the area.

The parallel nature of these factions results in a functionally same Skyrim at the end; all the same threats still press down on the province. Both gameplay narrations follow the same sequence of functions. However, the differences made to an individual player's narration are vast. Due to the queer nature of narrative temporality in Skyrim, the strong dialogic language is deeply impactful to players. Without the guiding structure of a consistent main questline, which I previously established is considered a weaker part of the game by many players, the next most prominent voice in the game relates to the civil war questline. Due to the melodramatic nature of the political language, the temporal orientation within the game, and the social and changing nature of dialogues outside of the game, what was once casual racism becomes blatant.

When I seek out Ulfric Stormcloak to join the rebellion, I am immediately uncomfortable, both as a player aware of her own context and as a character in the game. While Nyx cannot react to what is happening, my role-playing narration is all too aware of my embodiment in the game. Without any heed of an elf who has just wandered into the palace, Ulfric has the following conversation with his general, Galmar.

Galmar: "[The Jarl of Whiterun] won't give us a straight answer [what side he will fight]."

Ulfric: "He's a true Nord. He'll come around."

Galmar: "Don't be so sure of that. We've intercepted couriers from [the Empire's stronghold city]. The Empire's putting a great deal of pressure on Whiterun."

Ulfric: "And what would you have me do?"

Galmar: "If he's not with us, he's against us."

Ulfric: "He knows that. They all know that."

Galmar: "How long are you going to wait?"

Ulfric: "You think I need to send [the Jarl of Whiterun] a stronger message."

Galmar: "If by message you mean shoving a sword through his gullet."

Ulfric: "Taking his city and leaving him in disgrace would make a more powerful statement, don't you think?"

Galmar: "So we're ready to start this war in earnest then?"

Ulfric: "Soon."

Galmar: "I still say you should take them all out like you did [the previous king of Skyrim]."

Ulfric: "[He] was merely a message to the other Jarls. Whoever we replace them with will need the support of our armies."

Galmar: "We're ready when you are."

Ulfric: "Things hinge on Whiterun. If we can take the city without bloodshed, all the better. But if not..."

Galmar: "The people are behind you."

Ulfric: "Many I fear still need convincing."

Galmar: "Then let them die with their false kings."

Ulfric: "We've been soldiers a long time. We know the price of freedom. The people are still weighing things in their hearts."

Galmar: "What's left of Skyrim to wager?"

Ulfric: "They have families to think of."

Galmar: "How many of their sons and daughters follow your banner? We are their families."

Ulfric: "Well put, friend. Tell me, Galmar, why do you fight for me?"

Galmar: "I'd follow you into the depths of Oblivion, you know that."

Ulfric: "Yes, but why do you fight? If not for me, what then?"

Galmar: "I'll die before elves dictate the fates of men. Are we not one in this?"

Ulfric: "I fight for the men I've held in my arms, dying on foreign soil⁵¹. I fight for their wives and children, [sic] who's names I heard whispered in their last breaths. I fight for we few who did come home, only to find our country full of strangers wearing familiar faces. I fight for my people impoverished to pay the debts of an Empire too weak to rule them, yet brands them criminals for wanting to rule themselves! I fight so that all the fighting I've already done hasn't been for nothing. I fight... because I must."

Galmar: "Your words give voice to what we all feel, Ulfric. And that's why you will be High King. But the day words are enough, will be the day when soldiers like us are no longer needed."

⁵¹ Ulfric refers to the brutal war between the predominantly human Empire and the elvish Aldmeri Dominion. Given their cultural propensity for war and glory, many Nords were among the Empire's troops and lost during the war. Rather than continuing a war where they were outmatched, the Empire cut its losses and signed a peace treaty—shameful by the warrior culture of Skyrim's Nords as well as directly impacting them via a religious ban.

Ulfric: "I would gladly retire from the world were such a day to dawn."

Galmar: "Aye. But in the meantime, we have a war to plan."

The promilitary nationalist rhetoric—"the price of freedom," "the sons and daughters of Skyrim," "we are their families," "I fight because I must," begins to meld with supremacist statements such as "I'll die before letting [the Other] dictate the fates of men," soldiers "dying on foreign soil," and "our country full of strangers." In referring to other parts of the Empire as "foreign" and other non-Nord members of the Empire as "strangers"—in particular holding offense to the Dark Elf refugees from neighboring Morrowind—we begin to see lines drawn between Nord populations and all others. We are beginning to see lines drawn on ethnic lines, seeing languages that generically might be military-kitsch speaking for any popular culture wartime story, but in narrative context, we are seeing purposefully generic languages that speak towards American exceptionalism and white supremacy, along with violent repercussions for "others." Galmar's suggestions of violence as the only solution to the problems of Skyrim—"sword through his gullet," "kill him like you did [the previous king]," and "let them die" are met with cool indifference by Ulfric.

Hearing this conversation, I pause. Do I really think this is the right place for me? But then again, what are my other options? The Empire? The people who tried to have me killed just for existing in the wrong place at the wrong time? I may have crossed the border into Skyrim illegally, but does that deserve death? But part of my mind ticks back to the loud bigot I had met on the street on my way through Ulfric's city, who cursed me out for being an elf—not a Dunmer, like he openly insulted with hatred, but still an elf. I think about how someone told me Argonians can't even enter the city; they're only allowed on the docks. I think to the corner of Windhelm where Dark Elves are forced to live in a single run-down area of the city, or the number of angry Nords I'd met along the way whose battle-cry is "Skyrim belongs to the Nords!"

Another part of my mind ticks back to the ways I had heard pundits on TV and even family members repeat such similar sentiments—that those refugees were dangerous, that the government was giving too much freedom to people who weren't even citizens, that my aunt and uncle genuinely believe that our country was full of strangers.

What am I doing here? But I mean, it's this or the Empire. And why the hell should I support the Empire? They almost killed me! And the Nords are fighting for their right to practice their religion and live their lives freely. That can't be bad. That's what America is all about, right?

Oh.

I'm deeply uncomfortable. I've never felt particularly comfortable with my own citizenship, half-heartedly mumbling the Pledge of Allegiance each day in school until I was allowed the option to sit during it in high school. Patriotism seemed so...strange, my whole life. I wasn't proud to be an American; things that should be simple were not simple, for no other reason than other people's hatred and mistrust.

I shake it off. I'm not here to think about the real world. Dismissing my discomfort and pulling my head back in the game, I slowly approach Ulfric anyways, curiosity and distrust of the Empire fueling my footsteps.

I was experiencing what Elizabeth Robin Anklely refers to as political melodrama, a:

discourse cast[ing] politics, policies, and practices of citizenship within a moral economy that identifies the nationstate as a virtuous and innocent victim of villainous action. It locates goodness in the suffering of the nation, evil in its antagonists, and heroism in sovereign acts of war and global control coded as expressions of virtue” (2).

Coining the term via the United States' political response to the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center, the escalation of this kind of political discourse has increased exponentially in the years since, reaching its peak—at least I hope reaching its peak—during the Trump presidency. My skepticism of nationhood and nationalism as a cultural identity may have shifted the focus of my affective response—I was emotionally responding to the national rejection of refugees more so than being caught up in fearing them—but the ideological response of “evil must be punished” and understanding anyone or anything opposing what I understood as “freedom” certainly was a politically melodramatic response. Anklely also notes that:

Upon encountering its depictions, one may hate its overt pathos yet cry at the suffering it shows. One might reject melodrama's depiction of national identity yet find welcome connection in the virtuous community it offers. One might find that melodramatic tenets unacceptably simplify politics yet want to see brutal villains duly punished. Some parts of melodrama are more compelling than others, and melodramatic conventions do not need to be totalizing to have partial effects. (6).

This is how I found myself reacting to both real-world crises and my understanding of the political motivations and depictions of the Stormcloaks. Indeed, the melodrama is amplified in that the war plotline itself within the game is melodramatic in the sense that it is a fictional situation reflecting and refracting a real one. Returning to the conversation between Galmar and Ulfric, much of the pro-nationalist and pro-military rhetoric between the two falls into melodramatic framing. Revisiting Ulfric's speech, his most impassioned (and melodramatic) comments are made later in the conversation, when he says:

Ulfric: "I fight for the men I've held in my arms, dying on foreign soil. I fight for their wives and children, [sic] who's names I heard whispered in their last breaths. I fight for we few who did come home, only to find our country full of strangers wearing familiar faces. I fight for my people impoverished to pay the debts of an Empire too weak to rule them, yet brands them criminals for wanting to rule themselves! I fight so that all the fighting I've already done hasn't been for nothing. I fight... because I must."

In real life, this kind of speaking “cultivate[d] the heightened affects Americans were experiencing [after 9/11] by explicating them, naming sorrow, loss, and resolve in a way that turns them into norms for proper feeling and then yokes them together into a narrative trajectory” (Ankley 6) and it has a similar effect within Skyrim, however the great injustice done to the people of Skyrim is not a direct attack on civilians' lives so much as a political limitation of their livelihoods—the signing of the White-Gold Concordat treaty, which banned worship of the Nord's favored god among the Tamrielian pantheon. The treaty was signed by the Empire to end a long-lasting, brutal war with the elvish Aldmeri Dominion. Among the terms was outlawing the figure Talos, on the grounds that the Aldmeri Dominion believe the worship of Talos to be heretical⁵². The banning of Talos worship acts

⁵² According to the mythos, Talos was once a human who became a god. The Elves of the Dominion find this to be heretical because no mortal could claim to become an equal of the gods. On top of that, the deification of a human, rather than an elf, would be additionally heretical.

as the catalyst for shifting the civil war from a long-standing ethnostate project on the part of Nords in Skyrim into a fight for freedom against the Empire. The political melodrama of Skyrim's civil war very much lines up with the rhetorics of the American War on Terror, where:

. . . sorrow and loss pave the way for “great resolve,” so that the determination to “destroy” evil is positioned as a foregone conclusion that grows organically out of sorrow. The move to destroy terrorism then becomes a moral requirement and a narrative expectation for addressing the nation's suffering, rather than a contestable political decision.” (Ankley 6)

The simplistic framing of melodramatic politics, combined with the parallels to many real-world languages of American Exceptionalism—religious freedom, overthrowing an oppressive Empire, fighting for freedom—make the Nords deeply appealing to a wide American audience. Amy Kaplan notes that US Exceptionalism holds a “paradoxical claim to uniqueness and universality at the same time” (2003, 5) and that the US “upholds a doctrine of limited sovereignty for others and thus deems the entire world a potential site of intervention. Universalism thus can be made manifest only through the threat and use of violence” (2003, 6). This is to say that what may be considered vague political slogans—overthrow the empire!—becomes Americanized through American notions of nationhood.

America does not see itself as an empire, as American identity was forged by overthrowing the British empire; therefore, America is not an empire to the American mind, but an independent nation. In particular, white America understands its ideal country as “a unitary whole, threatened only by terrorists, but no longer contested and constituted by divisions of race, class, ethnicity, gender, or sexuality “ (Kaplan 2003, 8). America then, becomes the homeland to Americans that must be defended against outside attack and the realities of race, gender, sexuality, and other markers of identity become outside attacks.

When political melodrama is placed against a background of fantasy, rather than reality, its dialogic relationship begins to conflate the real with the fantasy. And in this fantasy world, states, like Skyrim, are predominantly ethnically drawn rather than geographically. Nords live here, so this is

Skyrim, Bretons live here, so this is Highrock, etc.. Skyrim, as a nation state, takes on these roles of a nation under siege by ethnic Others. Meanwhile, the overall narrative framing of the events of Skyrim place the player directly into a position where they would be not only sympathetic to the Stormcloaks and hostile to the Empire via the introductory cutscene, but also set in a political melodrama aligning the Stormcloaks with righteous revolutionaries. Time itself is set in a way that refracts ideological tenets of individualism and Americanized freedom. Time outside the game has also deeply impacted the ability for a player to read the melodrama in quite as naive a way as before. After all, the absolute melodramatic circus of the Trump administration put the Bush era to shame.

Again, I must emphasize that authorial intent matters far less than authorial narration. While real-world political melodrama is intended to be narrated via highly emotional and sentimental dialogisms, the refracted authorial narration becomes further separated from the play experience in a video game. When designing the Stormcloaks, I can imagine that the narrative designers on the project wanted to balance the very appealing “fighting for their homeland” faction by giving them a very unappealing trait—the blatant racism. In 2011, Nazi was still a bad word after all. I can’t imagine that the world building teams at Bethesda understood that rather than making a choice difficult—the Empire or the Stormcloaks—that they instead just made the casual racism present in American popular culture easy to swallow. Perhaps they intended to show the dark reality of the kind of ethnonationalism seen in the Stormcloak’s ideology. But regardless of intent, they created an ideal choice for white supremacists—something they should have thought through more clearly.

Ulfic’s own lands, where Argonian people aren’t allowed to enter the city, only work at the docks outside the city walls, and where Dark Elves are forced to live in a racialized slum, supply an example of his rule. Plenty of players who would agree that “racism is bad” would play the Stormcloaks, just ignoring or even making excuses for the racism present in the storyline. The blame-game begins: the Stormcloaks are ethnonationalists because the Empire/The Elves/The Other was

racist first, so Stormcloaks are just fighting for what is theirs! But what this ultimately comes down to in *Skyrim* is well summarized by Bjørkelo when he says:

The Nords are fighting a war to “liberate their Homeland” through violence. Beyond witnessing this struggle, the player can come across fights or prisoners of war being transported and choose to liberate them. And if the player chooses to join the Stormcloak’s struggle by following their questline, they will lead the group to victory through several quests of conquest. The game design encourages this kind of engagement with the world; furthermore, it allows players who are so inclined to act out their own political and racist fantasies by killing of non-white or non-Nord NPCs in *Skyrim*. . . The ability to join a racist revolutionary movement is a *designed affordance*, but acting out being an actual White Nationalist depends on *imagined affordances*. (Bjørkelo 2020, emphasis added)

These affordances, as described by Bjørkelo, can also be seen as authorial narration and player-narration; the fabula and syuzhet of the game both are designed to allow the ability to join the Stormcloaks, but it is in the players’ own self-narrations or in player-narrations that this can become a story of purposefully joining to support its racist causes. When I first played, it never crossed my mind that a player would join the Stormcloaks *because* of their racism; I understood it as players might join *in spite of* their racism. But again, this was the privilege of a young white woman living in a town with a 95% white population.

This division of “in spite of” versus “because of” has been amplified by the evolution of social dialogics over time. And time outside of the game has not been generous to the languages of *Skyrim*. More and more, the associations of whiteness and medievalism join together. But it is no coincidence that the medieval—more specifically, the neomedieval—and whiteness go hand-in-hand. Dorothy Kim (2019) writes at length about connections between the alt-right and medievalist studies, arguing that scholarly works in the field of medieval studies are actually complicit in the creation of historical whiteness. Helen Young argues that the concept of a racially homogeneous white Europe began to take root in the 1700s-1800s. Noting the influence of classical Roman and Greek models of

society, she notes that medieval times were considered “barbarous times” not worthy of interest (Young 2019, 235-36). She continues, noting:

In eighteenth- century Europe and in its colonies, newly emerging scientific discourses and methods were used to categorize humanity into races and subsequently to try to explain differences between the categories of people thus created. This way of thinking held that “races” had fixed characteristics, such as skin and hair color, intelligence, and capacity for artistic expression, that were inherited and persisted unchanged over centuries. . . . *Rather, race and whiteness took on new dimensions in the eighteenth century in response to the scientific thought of the Enlightenment, and they gained greater power when they were used to justify European colonialism and imperialism on the false ground that whites were inherently different from and superior to all other peoples of the world.* (2019, 236 emphasis added).

Thomas Blake notes that this kind of whitewashed Middle Ages specifically appeal to Alt-Right and white supremacist thinking because it inspires nostalgia for a past that never actually existed (Blake, 2020 180). In choosing to represent “rebel” characters with tropes so beloved of white nationalists, Bethesda sets the stage for white supremacists to not just choose to play as Nords but encourages them.

It’s 2020 and my name isn’t Nyx anymore, it’s Jassyn. I’m a Breton sorcerer slinging spells and brandishing twin swords made of pure magical energy when needed. Between being a magic user and being a Breton—not a Nord, but a human from the province to the west of Skyrim—makes me a less than ideal Stormcloak, but an acceptable soldier. Ulfric and Galmar’s conversation has never grated my ears more. Selfish, stupid, short-sided fools, unable to see the longer-term effects of the rebellion they want force across Skyrim. But I am here to oppose the Empire. That doesn’t mean I have to like the Stormcloaks, but as I remind them in a dialogue option, Skyrim is my home, too. Even if I don’t care about Talos or the Nords’ “plight.”

I prove my worthiness to Ulfric by fetching him an artifact, carrying some messages for him, and taking part in the Battle of Whiterun and personally joining him in overthrowing the Jarl. I may be some spell-casting Breton, but I’m the Dragonborn, and that carries weight. Not as much as it would be if I were a fellow Nord, but the Dragonborn is tied to Skyrim’s lands the same way that the Nords believe they are. With his approval, I am set loose on the world as a free agent, yet I am given orders to join camp after camp across the province to lead ambushes, skirmishes, and squads. Lead, as in be the first on the line, not in planning in any official capacity.

Galmar gives me my next task: infiltrate a fort, free captured Stormcloaks, arm them, and take the fort from the inside. I accept the mission and begin to walk away. As I

leave, Galmar barks “The Empire would have us be slaves to the Thalmor. We are not slaves. We are free men. Free men who would slay anyone who begs to differ.”

I stop in my tracks. The years since Skyrim’s release have shifted my discomfort to anger and I feel the predictable fury rise—it is not slavery to be held to the same standards as other citizens and undertake personal actions to ensure public good! It’s 2020 and the height of the pandemic. A vaccine is on the way. People are protesting “having” to take it, comparing it to slavery. Disgusting. Selfish. Deliberately ignorant. I grit my teeth and return to my mission. It’s not difficult to roleplay an angry Breton these days. I’ll do my missions and take over the nine holds for Ulfric while he sits comfy in his throne back in Windhelm. It’s easy to raise an army from an armchair, it turns out. Afterall, that’s how Trump was elected, right?

There is no immersion to be found in this questline anymore.

I pass by another Stormcloak soldier. “My cousin disappeared,” he says. “Some said it was the Thalmor. It wasn’t long before I found myself under Ulfric’s banner.”

“You don’t even know if it had anything to do with the Thalmor! Skyrim is a dangerous place and there are a million natural reasons he could have gone missing. But someone suggested it might have been an Other, so now you’re joining an ethno-state militia?”

That’s not a dialogue option anywhere but in my mind, of course.

My reactions and thoughts as I played reveal some of the changes over time—not just in my own understanding of race and whiteness, but to circumstances in particular. My arguments with fictional characters mean there was still a level of immersion occurring, but it was hampered by the dialogic connections between key points of dialog and my own context. The “slavery” line in particular stuck out; not just is wearing a mask or getting a vaccine a pathway to slavery, according to alt-right and white supremacist groups, but getting a vaccine would permanently and biologically mark you as inferior (Chabria 2020; Saphore 2021). “White slavery” has been a long-standing talking point intended to raise fear in white populations (Grittner 1990), and the most recent iterations of “white slavery” fearmongering was quickly becoming biological.

The parallels to white supremacist fears, uncomfortable when the game was first released, are too much for me in 2020. I knew going into a new playthrough, that I would be biased. Deeply

biased, in fact, since I am writing a doctoral thesis on exactly this. But what this means is that rather than looking too closely for things that aren't there, I'm deeply aware of the languages the game speaks.

But I am not alone in seeing these languages—other players certainly understand the evoked meanings by the dialogic interplay at work—but of course, different interpretations and affective responses change the players' comprehension of such languages. As Gerald Voorhees notes, “power is an effect of knowledge materialized through the actions of subjects. Power operates to the extent that the actions make sense in the context of the discourses that shape how people know the matter in question” (Voorhees 2014). Given the discourses that impact our understanding of both player-narration and authorial narration—real-life racism, white nationalist movement in the US, what ideological freedom means as a concept from personal and public perspectives, political melodrama, Black Lives Matter, neomedieval Vikings, and much more—players will understand the kinds of dialogic languages evoked by the Stormcloaks in very different ways.

Checking Reddit, I found a 2014 discussion board asking why racism in Skyrim is so downplayed.



Posted by u/[deleted] 7 years ago

66

Racism in Skyrim...?



It's my first playthrough as a non-Nord. My first almost three-year-old character that I've played on and off is the typical hack & slash Nord. My second was a Nord archer mage that I kind of got fed up of.

Now I'm a Khajiit and for the moment I'm avoiding the main quest by not going to Bleak Falls - so Dragonborn doesn't really even come into it.

While I was playing as a Nord you get exposure to a lot of implied and outright racism of Nords to the Khajiits, Dunmer and Argonians in particular. So I expected playing as a Khajiit to be harder somehow. Problem is it's not, apart from the occasional guard calling you a cat.

I feel kind of cheated. I expected arguments. I expected clawfights. Are there mechanics at work which do make it harder for you as a non-Nord that I haven't noticed, or is it actually all the same for the player?



69 Comments



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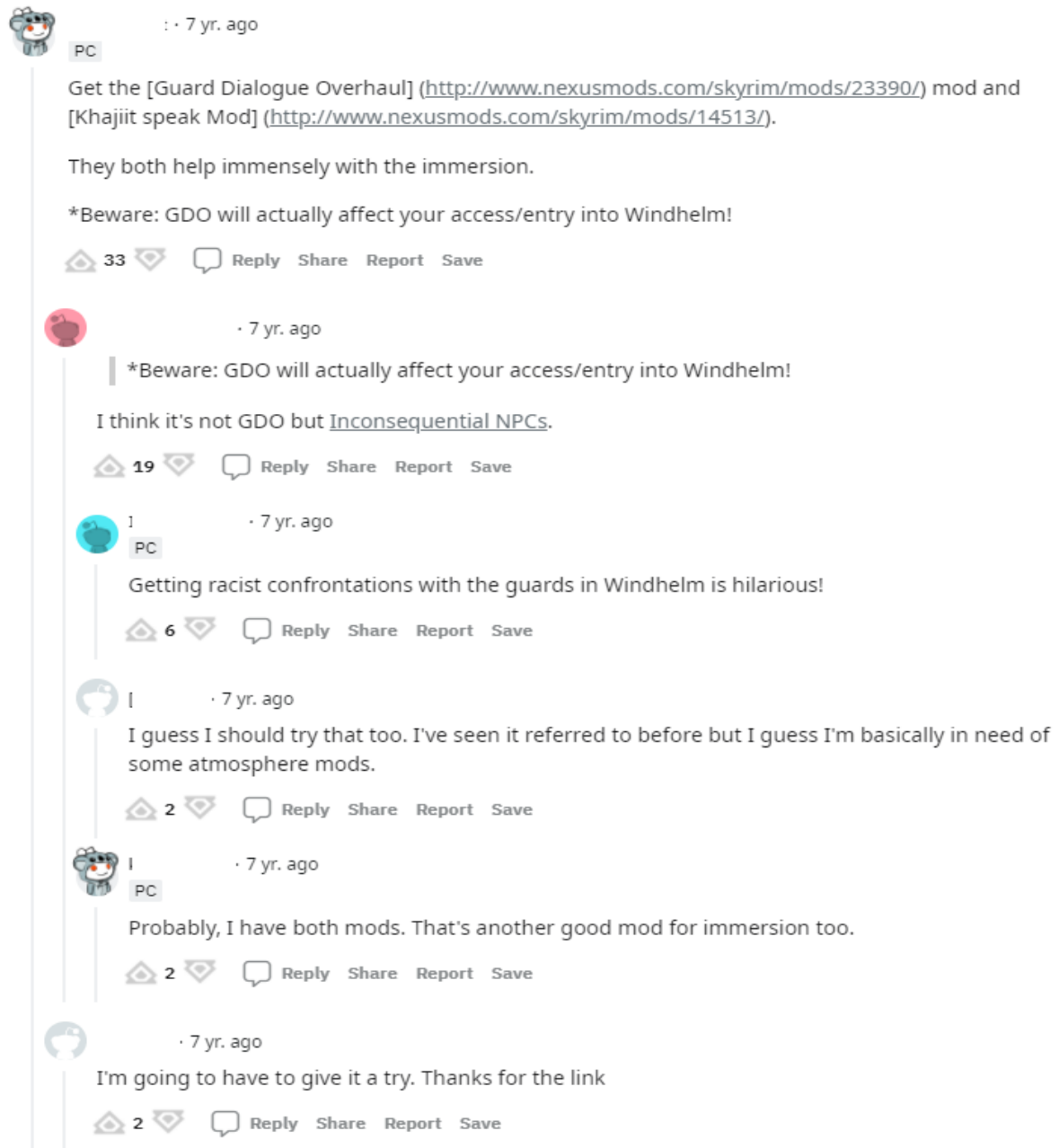
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(Fig 6.1) A Reddit thread on Racism in *Skyrim* (“R/skyrim - racism in skyrim...?” 2014)

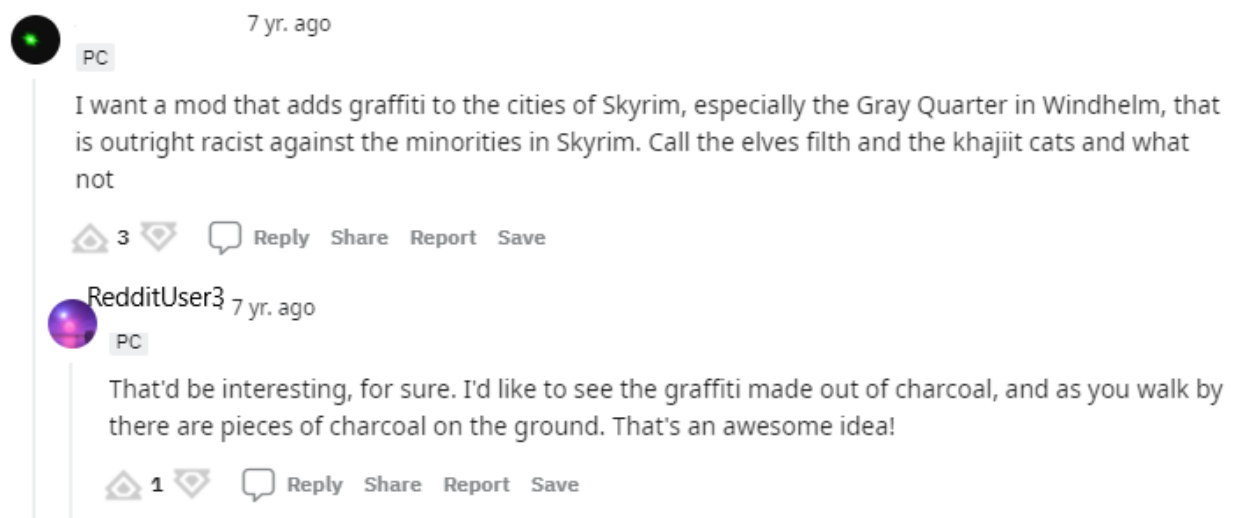
In this sense, they were wondering why the Dragonborn can be a minority race that is treated badly but still do whatever they want. For example, one Reddit user comments that:

“I think my biggest problem with the inconsistent racism is towards the Argonians. So Argonians are not allowed in Windhelm yet if you play as an Argonian you can go where ever the hell you fancy and nobody bats an eye.” (RedditUser2, name anonymized)



(Fig 6.2) Reddit thread recommending more “immersive” racism in *Skyrim* (“R/skyrim - racism in skyrim...?” 2014)

Rather than understanding this as a privilege of the Dragonborn, the discussion thread recommended game mods that increase the resistance and racism delivered to the player, speaking volumes about the players' own privilege, deliberately seeking out racist experiences and referring to them as "atmosphere" for the game as opposed to a parallel to real life. Note that a user here even goes so far as to call modded racist content "hilarious." Another player even calls for a mod that would add racist graffiti to the cities, encouraged by another user, referred to here as RedditUser3.



(Fig 6.3) Reddit thread recommending mods to create racist graffiti in *Skyrim* (“R/skyrim - racism in skyrim...?” 2014).

But another player, RedditUser4, comments “Lydia is racist. ‘Skyrim belongs to the Nords!’”, the same user RedditUser3 again responds:

Eh, that's debatable. There's a part in the main questline where, no matter what race you are, Jarl Balgruuf says "Spoken like a true Nord!" What does that say to you? If I'm a Khajiit, and he calls me Nord? Perhaps "Nord" is a mindset, not a race (well, obviously it *is* a race, but in this case also a mindset). Anyone who is willing to lay down their life for Skyrim is considered a Nord. However, there are many who take "Skyrim belongs to the Nords!" seriously, such as the Stormcloaks. Now, not all Stormcloaks are racist. Take Ralof, he's quite accepting no matter what race you are. But when you talk to Galmar, he'll comment on you being an outsider, but eventually will accept you. It's interesting to me. Anyway, I've rambled enough about this, that's simply my view on it. Take it as you will. (RedditUser3)

Odd that the same user who was enthusiastic about the prospect of racist graffiti in Skyrim was also so deeply forgiving of the Stormcloaks' racism. Yet another comment thread insists that the Empire is the racist faction, not the Stormcloaks, or that the Empire is "just as racist."



(Fig 6.5) Reddit thread of players arguing over which faction is more racist ("R/skyrim - racism in skyrim...?" 2014).

RedditUser5 in this conversation goes on to argue that Nords are treated as second-class citizens in a particular area of the Empire. The argument continues, shifting the term “racist” to “nationalist” instead and emphasizing that the Empire is imperialist, which is bad and probably racist. But each of the three Reddit users making this argument cite very specific Elder Scrolls lore and history, each jockeying to prove their knowledge of obscure fictional information forgives either the Empire or the Stormcloaks of their flaws.

Because of the queer nature of time within the game, players are without any strong sense of guidance within the game; they are “liberated” from heteronormative expectations and uses of time and left to make of their time whatever they will. However, combined with that, the layering of fictional history on top of the concept of racism acts as a double-voicedness, as Bakhtin refers to it.

As Bakhtin argues:

. . . all languages of heteroglossia, whatever the principles underlying them and making each unique, are specific points of view on the world, forms [291] for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings, and values. As such they all may be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically. As such they encounter one another and co-exist in the consciousness of real people—first and foremost, in the creative consciousness of the people. . . As such, these languages live a real life, they struggle and evolve in an environment of social heteroglossia. (Bakhtin 1981, 291-292)

The creative consciousness, as he calls it, is the first and foremost narration in a game like *Skyrim*, as the common mode of narration is that of the players’ own experiences and processes. The intentions of the authorial narration, I argue, was to complicate a choice which was made too easy by the social dialogues of players. Empires are bad, as we’ve seen discussed by players, and on top of that, this particular Empire has a history of unlikeable behavior in the game series that players may be aware of already. Between that and the way the Dragonborn is introduced to the Empire in the game—from a chopping block—players are extremely unlikely to favor the Empire. American audiences in

particular would find the Stormcloaks' political melodrama to be straight-forward and appealing, as "freedom" is a main tenant of American ideology.

Conclusion

When the player enters Whiterun for the very first time, they are tasked with alerting the Hold's leader with news of the destruction of a nearby town and incoming danger to the city. The player approaches the leader, alerting him to the threat. His initial reaction, to send support troops to ensure the safety of his people, is met with resistance from members of his court, seeing as moving troops to the south would be seen as intimidating to the hold to the south. Attempting to stay neutral in the civil war—the only hold to attempt to do so—has not proven to be simple; moving troops near the border would be seen as opposition to the faction supported by the southern hold. However, not moving the troops could cost hundreds of civilian lives. At the same time, provoking a faction within the civil war would undoubtedly cost thousands. Whiterun asks the player to question the costs of neutrality—in a world of constant conflict, is it safe to stay neutral? Or does not taking a side simply make one a target for all?

While moving the troops in this instance goes unnoticed due to the severity of the threat at hand (the threat being great enough that the southern hold is more concerned with its own people's safety than its positioning in the civil war), it is eventually up to the player what course Whiterun will take. There are three options: support the rebels and sack Whiterun as an object lesson; support the empire and sack Whiterun as an object lesson; or lastly, to not participate in the civil war questline at all, in which case Whiterun remains in a liminal state. Those are the options: destroy this city or do not play. There is the option to negotiate a temporary peace treaty. However, once the threat has been prevented, the civil war springs back to life. Pausing this war does not prevent it. Additionally, regardless of the side the player selects, the war does not truly end. While leaders may be exiled or

victorious, the citizens still feel the strain of a land divided. Food is still scarce. Skirmishes among soldiers occur on the roads between cities and towns. Animosity between the factions runs hotter than ever. If the rebels succeed in overthrowing the empire, whispers of fear question when imperial troops will return. If the empire puts down the rebellion, threats of violence and resurgence spill from fervent mouths. This is “evgir unslaad” in the ancient language of Skyrim, meaning “season unending,” eternal war. There are no winners in civil war, only more wars to come.

The dialogic relationships between queer time, political melodrama, and the Skyrim civil war creates a particular temporality for the Dragonborn, a “season unending” but not necessarily one of war. The temporal structures of *Skyrim* are queer in that the player is set outside of heteronormative/chrononormative expectations. The freedoms of queer time, however, comes without the prejudice and strife that are associated with queer time outside of the game. While the player must find their identity and decide how to use their time without chrononormative structures, it is a privileged form of queer time to have this freedom without cost.

Skyrim's Civil War plotline is structured to frame both sides of the war as unlikeable, but oftentimes, players are oriented to sympathize with the Stormcloaks over the empire due to their temporal experiences within the game. Through the appropriation of queer time within the game's diegesis, players associate with and enjoy a particular kind of freedom. However, through the refracted nature of real-world temporality and social change over time, these freedoms become less about rebellion and more about supporting the status quo—white supremacy and colonization.

Part of me wishes there was an option in the game to overthrow the leader of the Stormcloaks without taking sides with either binary of oppressive governments. Part of me wishes there was a quest to rally the Others of Skyrim—the elves, the Argonians, the Khajit, the Orcs—and overthrow the Stormcloak regime. At the same time, I recognize the power fantasy at play there, too; white saviorism and white liberation are just opposite sides of the white nationalist coin, as both presume

the supremacy of white populations. But I am not allowed revolution, only rebellion. One's political choices are limited in real life—this is a way that the game disappoints the promises of overthrowing a hated empire. But the discourse has only prepared Americans for the symbolic, not the actual. All I can do in Skyrim is storm the Capitol Building and then look around, questioning “now what?” while waiting for something to happen, some form of temporal control to interrupt, interject, and lead me in authoring my next steps.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Conclusion

In the introduction, I began this dissertation with a line of dialogue; “Skyrim belongs to the Nords.” Throughout, I demonstrate that the stylistics of the game’s narration acts to frame interpretations of its content through its structure. Doing so, I adapt dialogism to the exploration of space, time, and space-time. But what I discovered along the way was an uncomfortable resonance between queer play and white nationalist play. Both scorn the rules of a game and reject a hegemony of play; both inject their own content/themes given the opportunity; both rely on a certain freedom or willful failure to adhere to the norm. With the understanding that white supremacists see themselves as an oppressed minority, the connection becomes all the more clear, as well as all the more uncomfortable to players like me—queer and white. The constructions of whiteness as represented in the game mesh with the constructions of whiteness made by white supremacists through the formation of the Nord characters. The whiteness of Nords, then, goes on to reinforce non-diegetic constructions of whiteness, which also impacts the social constructions of real-life racial minorities due to the dialogical nature of the game’s spaces and temporalities.

The Structures of Silence

I began this project with the intention of finding all the ways that the queerness of time and space allowed players resistance. As I played, things changed. And the question became this: is the domination of queerness totalizing? How does something so seemingly positive in gaming as queer play intersect with the content of the game? Is the resistant nature of queerness dominated by the white nationalism that is too deeply woven into the spaces and times of Skyrim?

Overall, this dissertation makes the claim that what seems queer at a first glance can be anything but. The colonialism and white supremacy present in games like *Skyrim* act to dominate the queer potential for resistance to those very structures. Chapter 1, Chapter 2, and Chapter 3 work together towards a functional version of dialogism for the study of games, proving its relevance, justifying the changes I make to the original theory, and indicating how important dialogic readings can be. Because games are multimodal, they have layers of different “voices” that communicate ideas about the game to its players. These dialogic modalities “speak” different meanings to players, who then transform their interaction with these modalities into a gestalt narrative whole. Chapter 4 argues that the construction of timespace of *Skyrim* follows a chronotope of domination, where the player’s use of and engagement with the game are devoted to the control of time and space. Chapter 5 examines player self-narration and embodiment in space, looking at how spaces communicate to players, and Chapter 6 makes the case that player use and manipulation of time in the game encourages players to understand and interact with *Skyrim* in particular ways. Together, these chapters suggest that the ways players are oriented to play *Skyrim*, based on its spaces and temporalities, points players towards narratives that normalize and uphold instances of white supremacy based on narrative, interactive, and mechanical means.

I want there to be resistance. I want to lash out, I want the spikey energy of “queer as in fuck you” to reset the story. But the more I think about it, the less room for resistance I see.

I am not alone in seeking resistance. I am not alone in my frustrations with the game. But the particular frustrations I have with the game are certainly in the minority of frustrations about the game as a whole. I am far from an ideal player.

I try to make a list of sites of resistance.

- In the Dawnguard DLC, becoming a vampire allows you to decentralize the civil war and dragon questlines
- In the Dawnguard DLC, you meet a living snow elf and see parts of snow elf culture before erasure
- In the standard game, you become above the law and can resist however you would like
- In the standard game, you may ally with a small group of Forsworn who become friendly to you
- In the Hearthfire DLC, you can reject the adventuring life and play a more traditionally domestic life
- In the standard game, you may earn access to Orcish strongholds which have resisted colonization

I then realize what I've made a list of. More accurately, that list should read:

- In the Dawnguard DLC, becoming a vampire allows you to ~~decentralize the civil war and dragon questlines~~ *dominate the existing structures through a new mechanic*
- In the Dawnguard DLC, you meet a living snow elf and see parts of snow elf culture *before they were dominated to extinction. You also kill the only other living snow elf, leaving just one left in the world*
- In the standard game, you become above the law and ~~can resist however you would like~~ *dominate the existing structures*
- In the standard game, you may ally with a small group of Forsworn who become friendly to you *and continue harming the rest of the Forsworn, as only the small village becomes friendly*
- In the Hearthfire DLC, you can reject the adventuring life and play a *heteronormative life more traditionally domestic life*
- In the standard game, you may earn access to Orcish strongholds which have resisted colonization *and witness—only witness—their struggles against domination and erasure*

So much for resistance—this becomes a list of domination and, more crucially, of neutrality in the face of white supremacy and domination. The most resistance a player can manage is attempts at pacifism, which the game is not designed to support. It is possible to play peacefully most of the time, but it is impossible to engage in the main plots of the game without violence. All your power as the

Dragonborn is useless in the face of pacifism. You have no ability to advocate or protest in a way that impacts the game. You must, if you wish to resist, play queerly and against the grain of the game.

But while this dissertation has brought forth the argument that the chronotope of *Skyrim* is a queered creation, it is one deeply implicated by the ideologies of the “liberated queer” as opposed to the intersectional queerness by which I have critiqued queer whiteness (as discussed in Chapter 5). White queerness, much like white feminism, expresses the insular nature of privileged populations within queerness. The white queerness of this chronotope acts to draw out and appropriate the positive aspects of queer time and queer space without facing the socio-economic realities that form the necessities for queer spaces in the first place (as discussed in Chapter 4). The ways by which the chronotope of *Skyrim* is given its shape plunders the struggle from queerness and makes it palatable for twenty-first century tastes, making light of the hard-won joys of queerness by making invisible the struggles of queer people. Through this, the queered chronotope becomes the equivalent of the “very straight gay” or “normal gay” (again, discussed in Chapter 5) of queer time and space—the most privileged and far-removed from the kind of queerness the rest of us know and understand.

The Story so Far

The introduction first establishes concepts like dialogism in context of the “Skyrim belongs to the Nords” memes. This section puts forth the argument that dialogism is relevant, even crucial, for the study of games due to the multimodal nature of them, but we must adapt how we view dialogic languages. Rather than limiting the theory to traditional written or spoken texts, dialogism can and should be reimagined for the purpose of studying games so we can better understand not just why, but how players interpret various gameplay elements. In particular, a queer lens is valuable to this project because of the ways that time and space are structured within an open-world RPG—the player is not

limited to heteronormative uses of their time and space and instead must find their own pathways and meanings throughout the game.

In Chapter 2, I make the case that narrative theories are useful for the study of games, not just to understand the construction of narrative but to better understand how and why players interpret game narratives in the ways that they do. I unite the relevant literature on the topics through four approaches. This chapter acts to clarify and elaborate on the complex, multidisciplinary nature of the dissertation. It elucidates both the specific uses of chronotope and dialogism, but also contextualizes the academic setting in which I am taking part. First, I explore the development of narrative literary theory in Europe and North America and the parallel development of the Bakhtin Circle in Soviet Russia. Contextualizing Bakhtin's writing as a response to developments of theory in Europe and Russia during the 1940s makes a more clear picture of the reactions of North American and European scholars when his work was translated into English in the 1980s. By placing Bakhtin's work chronologically against the development of narratology and narrative studies, and eventually into queer and feminist narrative studies, I argue for the possibilities of queer dialogism and chronotope—which is the focus of the second section of this chapter. Providing basic definitions and examples of the two theories of dialogism and chronotope, I explore how these theories can be adapted for video games. In considering the traditional usage of dialogism or chronotope, I am able to illustrate the importance of the theories to the study of games in particular. Next, I demonstrate the gaps in game studies narrative scholarship, pointing towards the historical context of narrative and narratological studies of games. In the shadow of the Ludology V. Narratology debate, narrative scholarship in the field of game studies is still “catching up” to the rest of the field. Finally, the last section of this chapter considers the intersections of queer theory, narrative theory, and game studies, paying special attention to the ways that game narrative itself can be queer in its structure. In this section, I indicate

that wider participation in queer play by normative folks is not only possible, but fairly common in games, as many games place the player into a non-normative space and the player must find ways to exist outside of heteronormative expectations. This means that players are finding ways to “live life differently” (Ruberg 2019), so it is crucial that we understand what “different” ways of life that games are representing.

Chapter 3 acts as a kind of methods section—something not typically part of humanities-based research, but something I feel is important for game studies scholarship in particular. Since so much of game studies depends on participant observation (whether or not the researcher is included in that participant pool is up to the individual scholar), it can be difficult to know where to start. A personal goal of this dissertation is to act as a kind of toolbox for future work—my own and others’. The ethos of the research as well as the methods of research is something that game studies must begin to acknowledge more fully, as the growth of the field depends on building upon each other’s work, as opposed to reinventing existing work as I have done. That said, Chapter 3 explores my queer close-reading and self-observation methods. This work is deeply self-reflective, which I maintain is all the more important to discuss as a valuable research method in a field as varied as game studies.

Considering the languages of games to extend beyond the spoken or written word, the aim of this project is to discover the unspoken dialogics of *Skyrim* that contribute to white supremacist interpretations. Chapter 3 discusses the conceptual frameworks that allow me to do so, including queer play and failure (Halberstam 2014; Ruberg 2019), too-close reading (Miller 2014; Chang 2010; Stang 2022), and queer phenomenology (Ahmed 2006; Burrill 2017). I suggest that the construction of queer play is inclusive, but it is inclusive to the point where it can become destructive and support white supremacist thinking. Any queer study of games must take this issue seriously and ensure that the overlaps between queer play and white nationalist play are distinct—refusing to play in an

accepted way and creating one's own narratives and rule are second nature to many players, but I could just as easily be describing white supremacist play as queer play with that definition. Indeed, when I quoted Jack Halberstam early in this dissertation, I shared:

We can also recognize failure as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique. As a practice, failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities. (2011, 88).

To a white supremacist, this description of queer failure can easily be reappropriated and brought into ways to play whitely, such as the players observed by Bjørkelo (2020) who report spending their time purposefully killing any non-white characters based on the racial constructions of the game. As queer folks, we must take steps to ensure our spaces and theories cast out, rather than support, white supremacist play.

Chapter 4 begins the analysis of *Skyrim* in earnest, taking a look at time-space in practice. I argue that chronotope is an especially powerful tool for analysis in games, as temporal and spatial dimensions are built into the play experience. In the case of open-world RPGs, like *Skyrim*, this leads to a chronotope which is reliant on the player's position, where time and space are conquered by the skill and special powers of the Dragonborn. This chapter puts forth that players' interpretation of in-game events are guided by their previous experiences and moreover, by the representations of history within the game. One way history is represented in this chronotope is through what Bakhtin refers to as semi-literary narration—the use of books, journals, letters, and other written media located within the wider narrative experience. The other is through narrative architecture, or the ways that buildings and other forms of architecture act to narrate spaces and uses of time. In examining the ways that history is presented to the player, it becomes clear that the player is at the center of a temporality and spatiality that encourages the domination of time and space.

While it shouldn't be surprising that the player inhabits the role of a legendary hero—after all, it is a videogame—it is up to us as critical players to consider what it means to engage in time and space that is both queer and dominating. When we embody the Dragonborn, we embody domination. I make the claim that we must be aware of the ways we are oriented in space and time, especially when we engage in queer time and space, otherwise we risk inadvertently supporting the very kinds of domination that we seek to free ourselves of with our queerness.

Chapter 5 continues the argument, exploring how space in *Skyrim* is both queer and subject to this chronotope of domination. The kinds of place-making practices that players engage in when they play *Skyrim* creates queer spaces, or spaces that are otherwise separate from heteronormative spaces and the expectations that go with them. I demonstrate that when they do this, players destabilize the main narrative of the game and instead create spaces more personalized to their own abilities and interests. The dialogics of a neomedieval space and the queerness of the open-world roleplaying game clash in *Skyrim*, leaving spaces that can be filled in by players. However, while the narrative that emerges from this navigation of space is queer, but it is also forced to intersect with the content of the game that can develop into white supremacist beliefs, such as the formation of race as biological, the normative as white, and the rightfulness of claiming ownership of land by a “chosen” people.

The same can be said of any game that uses neomedieval tropes such Vikings as part of their worldbuilding. Although not intentional on the part of the studio, the cultural medley that makes “Viking” function also brings with it dialogical content, too. With “Viking” comes notions of the blonde hair, blue eyes, and light skin beloved by white supremacists, but also the concept of conquering “weaker” peoples. Despite “Vikings” traditionally pillaging Europe—a.k.a., other white people—that actually places them as superior to other light-skinned folks, as follows traditional white

supremacist beliefs of a chosen people among all others: an exemplary whiteness. Cultural works such as *Skyrim* draw these contexts into their content when they play with dialogic relationships like this one.

Finally, Chapter 6 explores queer temporalities and their dialogics within *Skyrim*. The construction of time within the game can be understood as queer in many ways, but it again fails to overcome the chronotope of the game overall. The player not only becomes master of space in the game, but also controls the usage of time in addition to controlling time itself. The player can change the ways that time itself operates in terms of hours, minutes, and days, as well as the ways that they use the time that they master. The temporal structures of *Skyrim* are queer in that they function outside of heteronormative and real-life expectations, but the freedoms of queer time that are desired by many outside of the game are available to the player without the real-world costs. The experience of being Dragonborn can be lonely, but it is nothing in comparison to the kinds of rejection, hatred, and oppression faced by queer folks. I argue that this diluted form of queer time enacts a privileged queerness that reinforces white and heteronormative standards—the player is free from the expectations of heteronormative life that may be stifling to the player, but they experience this liberation as a fantasy, rather than a reality with drawbacks to the majority of queer folks.

Resisting Domination

I want to make something clear. Queer play isn't doomed because of the intersections it has with white supremacist play. In the case of this particular example, *Skyrim* is thematically and structurally playing with too many tropes and themes that intersect with white nationalist beliefs for its queer play to resist. As a neomedieval game, *Skyrim* is immediately at risk of uncritically pulling on threads of white supremacy. The fact that *Skyrim* has dialogic relationships with Nordicism, a

rebellion narrative, solo-player role-playing, and an open-world structure all come together and orient the player in directions that integrate white supremacist play into queer play.

Partially, this is due to the dialogic relationships of Nordicism, as discussed above. The in-game Nords are dependent on popular culture configurations of Nordicism and Vikings. It's no coincidence that Nords are named such—Nordicist, already connected to white supremacist philosophy from its beginnings, acts as a connection between Nords and white nationalist viewpoints. Having an entire race defined by a combination of biology and culture in addition to visual elements such as appearance, conflates eighteenth and nineteenth century beliefs about race with our modern conceptions of race. It takes the social category of “white” and makes it about appearance, culture, *and* biological differences between the Nords' whiteness and other light-skin races in the game. While any human race can have light skin, none are the “standard” people of *Skyrim* except for the Nords. And Nords are the only humans that cannot have any dark skin tones—they are always light-skinned, no matter what.

But also, when it comes down to it, a large portion of the narrative focuses around the oppression of white people—the Nords—and their attempts to overthrow a multicultural empire. While the oppression faced by the Nords is religious, that does not mirror any real-world oppression faced by the average white Christian. Viewing themselves as an oppressed group, white nationalists will resonate with this narrative. The kinds of back-and-forth of who's more racist, the empire or the Nords, as I presented in Chapter 6, are endless on *Skyrim* discussion boards online. There are plenty of justifications that Nords aren't racist at all, they are just “defending their way of life” from outside influence. Such thinking aligns with white supremacist thinking, such as when Bjørkelo notes that:

It is a common stance among White Nationalists on Stormfront that the term “racist” is used to persecute those who want their people and nation to be free of “outside

influence”. They will say that they don’t hate other people; they only love their own. In this perspective, they are not on a mission to oppress or exterminate other races, but to liberate the “white race”, and prevent its extermination at the hands of the Jews and other forces moving in on their nations (Bjørkelo 2020).

These liberation fantasies make the oppression of the Stormcloaks and their struggle to unify their people and “protect” their lands from a multicultural empire all the more satisfying for white nationalist play. Even if one does not support white supremacy in real life, they are playing with the same fantasy as white supremacists in the game.

Mechanically speaking, the game is also a single-player game, which would put the focus on the individuality of the Dragonborn and their unique powers of domination. The player is set to be a lone-wolf—a dangerous creature separated from a community of peers. The Dragonborn begins their journey as a lone wolf, a solo agent acting without the support or direction from a particular group. But even saying that connects back to issues of white supremacy; how many white terrorists are referred to as a lone wolf by the media? This phrase is used to separate the ideological motivations away from the perpetrators of racially motivated violence (Belew and Gutierrez 2021, XV), so it is no surprise that the Dragonborn could so easily be referred to as one. But single-player RPGs in particular are at risk for this kind of queer/white play. The player is set as unique and separate from others and Others, giving them *carte blanche* for domination. Fantasy RPGs in particular are at risk because so many of them use race as a trope. Almost all role-playing games do this, but because race becomes a biological difference between people rather than a social categorization, as race is within the real world, it means that white supremacists can gesture towards physical biological differences between people and internalize their fantasy of racial separation. Single-player games—by which I mean not just games that are played by one person, but games that feature one playable protagonist on their own—are also at risk of supporting white play, as they feature heavily individualistic stories and

mechanics. There are many RPGs that use party-based or multi-character mechanic systems that may better support antiracist voices. It is noteworthy that the open-world RPG genre, which *Skyrim* is part of, is a more American-created genre, whereas many party-based RPGs come from Asian game studios.

In particular, single-player open-world RPGs featuring medieval settings—like *The Elder Scrolls* series (Bethesda, 1994-current development), *The Witcher* series (CD Projekt Red, 2007-current development), the *Dragon Age* series (Bioware, 2009-current development), or individual titles such as *Elden Ring* (From Software, 2021), or *Middle-Earth: Shadow of Mordor* (Monolith, 2014)—are likely to uplift white queer play. The open-world environment supports the formation of queer time and space within the game, opening the door for queer play. But neomedieval texts are rife with white supremacist ideology and the “weaponization of history” (Kaufman and Sturtevant 2020, 4). As Kaufman and Sturtevant note in *The Devil’s Historians*:

The weaponization of history doesn’t always involve actual facts about the past. It can rely on a foggy perception of history: a general, impressionistic sense of how things were, or even how they always have been. Sometimes it relies on what we now consider myth and legend. But accuracy does not always matter to people who are so attached to their ideas about the past that those myths are part of their identity. Murky historical narratives can offer toxic ideologies a patina of tradition or timelessness that make them seem natural, correct, or inevitable. And once that occurs, misconceptions can be difficult to shift. (2020, 4-5).

It is for reasons such as these that something like *Skyrim* can become a white queer playground. But queer play is beautiful. And one of the most beautiful things about it is that it is so versatile, so wonderfully fluid that it can change the way we play any game. My dissertation did not begin as a critique of queer play, nor was it my intention to critique the scholars and theories I hold dear. I am queer and these theories represent me. However, as a queer white person, I must be aware of the

problematic intersections my queerness has with my whiteness. This dissertation is not a condemnation of queer play. Rather, I consider it, as Kai Linke writes:

. . . [an] invitation to white LGBTIQ people to make explicit our implicit assumptions about the workings of racism within LGBTIQ communities and beyond, to take a good, long look at how we (would like to) see our ourselves, to challenge ourselves to let go of flattering myths of white LGBTIQ innocence, and to replace them with an honest appraisal of the precise ways in which we are actually the problem. (2021, 15)

Simply enough, queerness does not eliminate or sidestep the realities of whiteness and its domination. As Bonnie Ruberg reminds us, “Queerness and video games shares a common ethos: the longing to imagine alternative ways of being and to make space within structures of power for resistance through play” (2019, 1). This longing, this ethos, can be appropriated intentionally and non-intentionally, and it is the responsibility of white queer folks to resist.

Final Thoughts

Throughout this dissertation, I’ve referred to the chronotope of the game as a chronotope of domination; the stage is set for queer play, but that queer play is oriented through a lens of whiteness and white liberation fantasies. This kind of chronotope creates a powerful stage for queer storytelling, but without attention to the ways the structure orients us, we create spaces and stories that repeat the same cycles of power ad infinitum. The ways we embody game narratives—from mechanics to visual representation and more—positions us in particular ways. Our bodies, in video games, become a collection of ideas, and these ideas shape the ways we interact with space and time. Returning to Sara Ahmed, she explains that we should:

remember that some spaces are already occupied. They even take the shape of the bodies that occupy them. Bodies also take the shape of the spaces they occupy and of the work they do. And yet sometimes we reach what is not expected. A space,

however occupied, is taken up by somebody else. When bodies take up spaces that they were not intended to inhabit, something other than the reproduction of the facts of the matter happens. The hope that reproduction fails is the hope for new impressions, for new lines to emerge, new objects, or even new bodies, which gather, in gathering around this table. (2016, 62).

Our bodies, in a video game, are never interacting with an empty space; the very ways temporal and spatial settings are designed fills them with other ideas that dialogically brush up against the ideas we bring to the game. When we intersect our ideas with a game, we can develop new ways of thinking or change our existing ones. Or as Ahmed says:

The "new" would not involve the loss of the background. Indeed, for bodies to arrive in spaces where they are not already at home, where they are not "in place," involves hard work; indeed, it involves painstaking labor for bodies to inhabit spaces that do not extend their shape. Having arrived, such bodies in turn might acquire new shapes. And spaces, in turn acquire new bodies. (2016, 62).

Skyrim, as a game system, as a culture of play, and as an engine for narrative creation, orients us to particular stories. Character identity, personal identity, and the rules and tropes we play with and as—these all collide, allowing players a chance to acknowledge the uncomfortable patterns we have become too accepting of as players.

Yet players themselves can resist the limitations of this all-too-common orientation through their own player-narration as well in a limited number of moments within the game. Given the chance to re-orient ourselves as players and characters within a fictional world, we can find new conclusions about the structure of, the stories we bring out of it, and the cultural and political tropes we perpetuate, subvert, and attempt to disrupt to reevaluate and reimagine possibilities for our story and reorient the structure of the game. There is also a point where developers themselves must become aware of the stories that they enable through the modalities that they collect when designing a game. There are five main things that orient players towards white supremacist readings of *Skyrim*—the neomedieval nature of the game, the Nordicisms including biological race, the narrative of white liberation, the single-player format, and the open-world genre. These all together create a dialogue

that supports and even uplifts white supremacist thinking. I am not suggesting that these elements together are always going to lead to white nationalist play. Uncritical design with these elements, however, welcomes it.

When designing and including elements like this, developers and designers should take note and think critically about the messages that they are enabling. Video games are not something that people take lightly. Millions of hours of *Skyrim* have been played by folks from all over the world; what the game normalizes has been, and will continue to be, widely spread. While a developer cannot—and should not—attempt to fully control the ways that players narrate an open-world game like *Skyrim*, they must take responsibility at an earlier stage than that of play. There needs to be room for resistance. There needs to be spaces and times for reflection upon actions. There needs to be a unified action on the part of developers to pay attention to the ways that their games communicate.

On the part of scholars, the differences between queer play and playing whitely must be examined more fully and crystalized for queer play to remain intersectional and resistant to dominant structures. It is a limitation of this dissertation that it is so firmly planted in Eurocentric models of narrative and narrative theory but given the focus of the dissertation on the ways that whiteness can be perceived and understood in queer spaces, it is an appropriate limitation. Future work for this topic might include perceptions of whiteness from another part of the globe or self-perceptions of race in other global contexts—e.g., a dialogic exploration of how Asianess is represented in Asian games. Such a project would require collaboration on my part due to my own positionality, but such a collaboration would be welcome.

But in the end, all I have to offer is this. *Skyrim* does not belong to the Nords. Make *Skyrim* queer again. And not gay as in “happy,” but queer as in “fuck you.”

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