

“An Affront to My People:” Excising the Other from the Fantasy of Skyrim

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the signs and narrative elements through which a popular gaming company, Bethesda, imagines and perpetuates stereotypes and racial essentialism relating to Black and Indigenous cultures and bodies. Such perpetuations work to solidify the racial “Other,” especially BIPOC, but also allow the player to join in immortalizing and taking accountability for such essentializations. These devices are most evident in the fantasy role-playing game, The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, in which bestial and Tolkien-esque races (Elves, Orcs, etc.) are both playable and encountered by players. My paper primarily focuses on the Orcs, or Orsimer, a race which is veiled as members of the African diaspora through their appearance, culture, and history. I will also analyze narrative and gameplay elements that contribute to centering a modern understanding of normative Whiteness, even in world with a (supposedly) drastically differing racial-political system. To this end, I employ close readings, semiotics, and gameplay analysis of Orsimer player characters, non-player characters, and the environment itself, drawing compelling conclusions concerning racialized representations and the player’s experience of embodying racialized bodies through play-acting. As one of the definitive fantasy experiences of the 2010s, Skyrim’s particular pattern of racial politics is deeply influential in how players consider race in both real and game world. I demonstrate how Bethesda gives its players the tools to project and reenact historical White supremacy, even without the players’ knowledge or consent. Conversely, I will also point to the power of video games and generative narratives as a potential for players to undermine these racist assumptions, constructing their own decolonial narratives through modding and subversive play.

Essentializing the Outsider

“I’ve no problem with your kind, Orc. But that stronghold they’ve got in the south-east? Narzulbur?

It’s an affront to my people.” –Windhelm Guard

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim (Bethesda) was released in November 2011, a lifetime ago by digital standards. Upon its release, the game received prestigious video game awards and massive cultural and commercial success, thus building upon the loyal fanbases of earlier games in the franchise as well as Bethesda's other, popular titles. In the context of videogame history, *Skyrim* is undoubtedly old, but the continual release of new editions, downloadable content, and a loyal modding community have kept the game popular in gaming spheres. For scholars, *Skyrim* should serve as an important touchstone, though, as it offers a rare glimpse into an attempt at a fully immersive, realistic fantasy world for players to experience alone and at their own pace. This world as well as the players who rely on it, though, are quite susceptible to falling into the trappings of Eurocentric thinking: “a kind of vestigial mental grid or epistemic machinery that enshrined colonialism's hierarchical stratifications, rendering them as natural, inevitable, and even ‘progressive’” (Shohat & Stam, 2014, p. 364). While past research has illustrated that White nationalist gamers interpret *Skyrim* as directly engaging with themes of ethnonationalism and colonialism, less has been said about *how* the game achieves such ends and what they implicitly argue about racial identity for an imagined audience (Bjørkelo, 2020). *Skyrim*'s extensive lore and histories, alongside the racialized gameplay and geopolitics I will examine in this paper, help elucidate how popular cultural artifacts are capable of reimagining colonialist and racist pasts as natural and immutable. Furthermore, I argue that such games appropriate BIPOC-coded (Black, Indigenous, People of Color)¹ characters while excluding them from themes and narratives in which they and their real-world counterparts would have historical stake.

As all games in the *Elder Scrolls* series, *Skyrim* takes place in Tamriel, on the subcontinent of *Skyrim*. As often happens in these games, the player character begins their journey as a prisoner. In the game's first instances of characterization, the player, gazing at their brothers in chains from a first-person perspective, is asked if they were “trying to cross the border,” before walking into an Imperial ambush (*Skyrim*, 2013). Even before naming their character or choosing their race, the player is physically and socially situated as transgressive. Guards and prisoners hint at conflict between the Imperial and Indigenous (Nord) forces, and they are introduced to the “true High King” of the land, himself in chains as well. In this way, the game already prompts the player to begin narrativizing their character. Why are they in

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chains? What do they make of this king? As the prisoners arrive, your character drops off the cart and is assessed by a pair of Imperial soldiers, after which the player is thrust into character creation. In addition to choosing a character name, appearance, and a binary choice of gender, the player can select a “race.” In contrast to general appearance and gender, race has a tangible impact on the player’s experience of the game. There are ten races to choose from in *Skyrim*, and each race has its own associated strengths and weaknesses. Brief summaries give the player an overview of the stereotypes of each race, and upon choosing these details and naming their character, they are thrust back into the storyline, where a guard named Hadvar and an Imperial captain immediately react to the player-character’s chosen race. For example, if the player chooses a Khajit, who are cat-like people coded as the real-world Roma people, Hadvar asks, “You with one of the trade caravans Khajit? Your people always seem to find trouble.”

At this moment, when Hadvar initially reacts to the player’s choice, a tension begins that the game never resolves. The player, having lost their immersion due to the character creation screen, must now balance between underlying meanings of the game’s attempt to react to their choices and the knowledge that they are the main character. Because the player knows that their created avatar will be the focus of this single-player game, then it does not matter what race they choose, as all choices are equally able to accomplish tasks and finish the game. However, by immediately calling attention to this first, major choice, the game teaches the player that their choice in race *does* matter, as they will be stereotyped by non-player characters and encouraged to play a certain style in accordance with their race. Past scholarship has pointed out the Redguard of *Skyrim* as the most obvious visual referent for BIPOC in the game (Cooper, 2016, p. 100; Dietrich, 2013, p. 93; Poor, 2012, p. 387), but my analysis draws from historical representations of race in fantasy worlds as well as the context under which players will encounter such races. This paper, then, will focus on this dynamic with regards to the Orsimer, or Orcs, as they are commonly called in the game.

I will argue that *Skyrim*, like many fantasy role-playing games, encourages players to stereotype and essentialize the races of the game while simultaneously pitting races into conflict with one another as representative of their inherent beliefs. As such, *Skyrim* operates as a game where the races have been precisely calibrated as just-enough apart from audience perceptions of races in the real world. Literature concerning race and video games often focuses on actual depictions of Black people (Leonard, 2009) or on the experiences of BIPOC in gaming in hostile spaces (Gray, 2020). Other scholarship on video games (Higgin, 2009; Monson, 2012) has often focused on the representations of race in fantasy massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), but *Skyrim* markets itself as an experience mediated by only one person in a free and open gamespace. Through its single-player gameplay and the modding community, players are free to usurp or undermine narratives of colonialism and racism, but such efforts are reciprocated by players who seek authentic exploration of the racial dynamics at play. All in all, developers and modders both explicitly want to maximize verisimilitude, causing the races and symbols of *Skyrim* to “evolve into the hyper-

real, which is protected from the imaginary and from the distinction that exists between it and the real. The hyperreal is when the individual fails to distinguish the real from fantasy” (Nashef, 2016, p. 40). As such, I argue, players are subliminally aware that they are playing in a racialized medieval fantasy world with real-world connotations of racial supremacy and hegemony. As Smith (2016) argues, turning to the medieval in times of moral uncertainty or racial panic allow contemporary folks to “clarify the moral boundaries of the society in which they occur” (p. 13). To explore how *Skyrim* perpetuates notions of racial essentialism, Eurocentric ideals of history and civilization, and inherent conflict between racial/ethnic groups, I will draw on decolonial literature of the 20th century and contemporary literature on fantasy and video games. In this way, I hope to show how *Skyrim* subtly reimagines colonialism as a positive experience for humanity while simultaneously erasing the margins and nuances between the Occidental and the Other.

Roots of the “Black” Orc

Beginning my analysis, it is necessary to briefly explore the associations that many players will have with Orcs, as they have been a staple in many iterations of high fantasy since their inception. While the first depiction of the Orc in *The Elder Scrolls* series came in 1994’s *Arena*, the primary, defining characteristics have stayed the same. Orcs are large, muscular creatures with tusks and snarling expressions. They have greenish-greyish skin color and are often characterized by their tribal lifestyle and warrior mentality. This description holds much in common with depictions of the Orc throughout the 20th and 21st century, so I will turn to a few popular examples. The Orsimer, naturally, borrow a great deal from J.R.R. Tolkien’s Orcs, and, as such, follow in a long and complicated history of fictionalizing the Black, savage “Other.” Perhaps most applicable for solidifying an idealized Orc for the intended audience of *Skyrim* is the *Lord of the Rings* film franchise. The franchise, spanning the years 2001-2003, brought the works of Tolkien and his creatures to the mass market. In them, depictions of the good, White, European humans are faced with annihilation by depersonalized, identical, evil Orcs. Interestingly, the films’ racial codings seem to both homogenize and conglomerate the characteristics of good and evil. As such, race in the films “appear to have no referent; they exist at the level of pure discourse” (Kim, 2004, p. 880). The Uruks, a particularly vicious type of Orc, are “big, black, savage, and dreadlocked.” Tolkien himself, in a private letter to a friend, described their depiction in his books as “squat, broad, flat-nosed, sallow-skinned, with wide mouths and slant eyes: in fact degraded and repulsive versions of the (to Europeans) least lovely Mongol-types” (Carpenter, 1981, #210). They are, indeed, a sort of catch-all monstrous depiction of the evil, savage nonhuman.

These monstrous beings exist in contrast to the “Men of the West,” elvish, and hobbit characters, who are all often empathetic, civilized, and associated with the word “White.” These characters, particularly the humans, heavily draw on the iconography and speech of Scandinavia, Vikings, and Old English (Kim, 2004, p. 876). In contrast to the White castles and idyllic townships of men in the *Lord of the Rings* series, Orcs are birthed in mud pits, thrive

in tribal camps, and serve dark lords in black, obsidian-like towers. Though *Skyrim* complicates this Manichean relationship of human to nonhuman, it does not do so in any way that challenges the racialized essentialism of *Lord of the Rings*, and, aesthetically speaking, it draws a great deal of inspiration from the film series.

Scholars have often turned to popular gaming franchise *World of Warcraft* (2004), to understand adaptations of such racial politics. I will be examining both *World of Warcraft* and *Skyrim* as gaming artifacts based on three intertwining perspectives: a gameplay analysis, a critical textual approach, and an approach based on reader response theory (Packer, 2014, p. 84). That is to say, I will be analyzing the overt knowledge and histories of Orcs that the games explicitly communicate to their players and the latent signs with which game covertly communicates further information related to how the Orcs *should* be played, and I will be doing so from the perspective of the player. This approach allows us to explore how the signs and narratives of the game interact with the often-Eurocentric background frames of thinking that players bring into the world. Orcish player characters in *World of Warcraft* are first greeted by a narrative explaining the facts that shaped their avatars' histories: they were corrupted by demonic forces; they have been at war with humans for generations; and they have been led to a savage and inhospitable land by a character named Thrall (Blizzard, 2004). Moreover, as opposed to the Manichean "good" and "evil" world of Tolkien, these Orcs are proud, shamanistic, and capable of moral thought. From this moment, players are blitzed with sights, sounds, and quests that repeatedly impart one lesson: the lines separating races in this world are absolute. As summed up by Monson (2012), "All members of a particular race group are designed to share certain immutable qualities, including intellect, temperament, morality, strength, and honor, thus making one member of a racialized group largely indistinguishable from another" (p. 54). While it was certainly easier for Blizzard to create a limited number of character designs and voices, the effect on the game world is immediately perceptible and absolute. As all the races in this game (and *Skyrim*, I argue) are essentialized and without transgression. Mixed-race characters are extremely rare (and unplayable), few non-playable characters (NPCs) exist outside of the racially designated realms assigned to them, and cultural characteristics (architecture, language, symbols) are largely confined to the races which "own" them.

While *World of Warcraft* players may be able to interact with one another and challenge these inherent, immutable characteristics, the *Skyrim* player is left by themselves to either challenge or abide by the prescribed rules of this imagined world. Moreover, because the non-player characters of the Orcs in *Skyrim* are associated with a variety of incoherent, disjointed cultural signifiers, they cannot be said to represent or be inspired by any singular race or culture. Instead, as a gestalt, "the human imagination fills in components that may exist out of sight, or may not exist at all but are still inferred to be there" (Majewski, 2018, p.145). This effect unifies the disparate sights and sounds of racial groups in fantasy worlds. However, even when compared to the racist depictions of Caribbean/South American trolls of *Warcraft*, who speak with a Jamaican accent, dance in capoeira-like fashion, and worship

“voodoo” and “loa” gods, the Orcs of both franchises represent an even less coherent assemblage. Even the Khajit of *Skyrim* form a far more easily seen connection to the Roma people, as they speak with vaguely West Asian accents, travel in caravans, and are generally mistrusted for thieving and drug usage.

The only sort of noticeable direct comparisons are based in racist histories of African/African American peoples and racist depictions of Black faces; Orcs in these franchises tend to have squat, broad noses, small eyes, and jutting chins with an underbite. Indeed, in *Skyrim*, there are few cultural artifacts of the Orcs that invite analysis: their architecture is nondescript, they possess few books, and they seem to have no instruments. Most information about Orcish culture must be explicitly communicated by Orcish non-player characters, with most of this information being brief descriptions of patriarchy, polygamy, combat, and their relationship to the natural world. This last one holds some value, though, as these Orcs seem to embody a close relationship to the land in a way that most of the other races of *Skyrim* do not. Mining is a vital duty of Orcs in *Skyrim*, and blacksmithing is seen as each Orc’s birthright. The chieftain’s second wife is referred to as a “forge-wife” in game, for instance. More than resources to exploit, the Orcs of *Skyrim* often figure the earth, ore, and metal as extensions of themselves and their society. Figuring their personhood in this way, the Orcish peoples of both *Skyrim* and *Warcraft* are as different from the White races of each world. Through their often-ontological connections to the Earth and the elements, I assert that both groups represent implicit challenges to other cultures in their game world, forming assemblages that counter the traditional personhood of Western cultures (Allewaert, 2013, pp. 5-6). This is not a coherent vision of the Orcs, nor the Black diaspora upon which I argue they depend, but the gameworld does not necessitate a coherent vision in order for players to latch on to essentialized racial groups as “weird” or “savage.” Perhaps the most vital way through which the game codes the Orcs as Black is that they stand apart from races that represent “a normalized origin narrative of survival-through-ever-increasing-processes-of-consumption-and-accumulation” (McKittrick & Wynter, 2015, p.11). Nords and Imperials build up castles, perform academic pursuits, and create formal structures of governance and bureaucracy; Orcs often don’t. Indeed, Orcs’ contrast against the other races of *Skyrim* mirrors traditional, racist dichotomies between “Western” societies and the global South.

Limits of Racial Absence

It is not enough to say that the Orsimer are often defined by their resistance to White “civilization,” their tribal and “warrior” culture, and their facial structure with all its phrenological connotations. Rather, I argue, this association is created by a dynamic prevalent in fantasy media and especially video games. Because the Eurocentric developer and gamer does not see a place for BIPOC characters in the medieval fantasy setting, “Black characters within video games almost exclusively function as synthetic sites of racial tourism and minstrelsy, wherein White fantasies and desires of hypermasculinity and sexuality can be inscribed on the Black body and performed without punishment” (Higgin, 2009, p.16). I argue that in

Skyrim, the White desire goes beyond hypermasculinity and sexuality, enveloping a need for the savage, the outsider, and the barbarian. The long-bearded, castle-building, honor-bound, “good” masculinity of the Viking-like Nord is balanced against bestial, backwards, polygamous “bad” masculinity. *Skyrim* positions itself in a long line of media that reimagine and recontextualize the Middle Ages and medievalism, positing the Norseman as the embodiment of “archetypal European heroic masculinity” (Calderón, 2007, p. 289). This dichotomy plays into Helen Young’s (2015) descriptions of fantasy’s “habits of Whiteness,” wherein the histories and associations of who is and is not “White” in the world “influence who can be present, and what is seen, thought, and done, by creating patterns of bodies and spaces alike” (Young, 2015, p. 11). In this way, the Orcs of *Skyrim* are not cast as Black because they are associated with any coherent culture of the Black diaspora, but, rather, the player sees the Orc in *Skyrim* as a racialized Black body because they are not seen in White spaces, do not act like White characters, and cannot influence the events of the world like their White counterparts.

The effects of such racialization on the player should not be overlooked, as players are known to create avatars with which they can empathize and identify. Here, I make such assumptions about the gameworld due to literature on the effects of interactions between the player and their avatar. Psychological studies have demonstrated how players create avatars that are idealized versions of some aspect of themselves, or at least an idealized version of how they would act in the game world (Thomas & Johansen, 2012). Indeed, as game researchers have noted, “people often say that it was through their avatars that they found a ‘better’ version of themselves, one that felt even more right than their offline body” (Taylor, 2002, p. 55). Specifically, players find that their virtual selves are “more conscientious, extraverted, and less neurotic” than they believe their normal selves are, perhaps due to anonymity and a perceived lack of repercussions (Ducheneaut et al., 2009). This attachment can go far enough to cause genuine distress in players when they feel that the locus of their identity, the avatar, is treated unfairly by other players or the game itself. As Wolfendale (2007) notes, “It is this combination of presence, identity and communication that explains both why avatar attachment is common and why harm to avatars can cause great distress” (p. 114). While much of the research cited here focuses on games in which a player’s avatar will be viewed by others, the players of *Skyrim* likely have similar considerations in the creation of their character.

Keeping these associations in mind, then, let us examine how the world of *Skyrim* explicitly characterizes Orcs, now understanding that such characterizations present opportunities for players to empathize or discriminate. While I will later analyze the gameplay dynamics that demonstrate the dichotomous relationship between Orcs and the White, humanized races, the game explicitly makes the Orcs’ differences plain. In the in-game book “Notes on Racial Phylogeny” (2021), Orcs are placed alongside “goblins, trolls, [and] harpies,” as all are creatures that the learned peoples of *Skyrim* know little about their reproductive characteristics. Though such a document is likely only present as an attempt at verisimilitude, I argue

that this effort is vital in understanding how *Skryim* understands the differences between its White-coded and Black-coded denizens. The book goes on:

there have been cases of intercourse between these “races,” generally in the nature of rape or magickal [sic] seduction, but there have been no documented cases of pregnancy. Still the interfertility of these creatures and the civilized hominids has yet to be empirically established or refuted, likely due to the deep cultural differences. Surely any normal Bosmer or Breton impregnated by an orc would keep that shame to herself, and there’s no reason to suppose that an orc maiden impregnated by a human would not be likewise ostracized by her society.

Interestingly, this artifact of the game positions itself as a biological or anthropological work, and reading the book increases the player character’s ability in restoration (healing) magic, lending it some measure of credence in the game world. Naturally, this book plays into a great deal of racist stereotypes about the sexual potency and aggression of BIPOC, but it also equates biological differences to cultural ones, hypothesizing that it is the cultural dissimilarities which have prevented pregnancies or proper couplings. This same book gives a reason for why mixed-race characters are largely absent in the world. It asserts that all creatures inherit race from their mother, a likely reference to racist ideals about motherhood and racial heredity (Morgan, 2018). Of course, Orcs are absent from this dynamic in the game world, as their relationship to other races has yet to be demonstrated, at least from an academic perspective. Similarly to *World of Warcraft*, *Skryim* posits that syntheses between racial groups cannot biologically exist. Moreover, this racial uniformity results in inevitable consistency in the architecture and cultures of the Orcs and Nords of *Skryim*.

I argue that, in *Skryim*, the player reads the cities (called “holds” in the game) as European, White spaces. As these places are primary locations for buying items, completing quests, and upgrading your character, they are quite important for the player character, and the player will doubtlessly notice the Viking-like armor, Scandinavian names, and wooden longhouses of the holds. The holds are mainly populated by Nords and under the command of a jarl. These areas tend to be cosmopolitan (though predominantly Nord) and progressing through the game necessitates a great deal of familiarity with these cities and their citizens. These areas stand in stark contrast to the remote and hostile Orcish areas of the game. While players may find Orcs in most locations throughout *Skryim*, they are mainly found in Orcish strongholds—walled and defended areas at the periphery of the physical map and the gameplay as well.

A primary characterization of the Orcs is performed by the strongholds, as they elucidate why players are expected to interpret Orcish culture as uncivilized or savage. Walter Rodney (1973), a Guyanese political activist, historian, and academic, sums up a useful understanding of “development,” and, in each case, the Orcs find themselves “behind” the White Nord. In becoming more developed, societies experienced “changeover from hunting and gather-

ing wild fruit to the domestication of animals and the growing of food crops... [and] the improvement in organization of work from being an individualistic activity towards an activity which assumes a social character through the participation of many” (Rodney, 1973, p. 8). The Orcs, owing to their relative dependence on hunting and foraging and the threats posed by nearby wildlife, are meant to be interpreted by players as less developed than the Nords of the region, and certainly of the invading Imperial legion.

Figure 1: Jorrvaskr, Windhelm Mead Hall (*Jorrvaskr*)



Figure 2: Typical Orc Camp (*Gash Murug*)



Moreover, the traditional Orcish homeland of Orsinium has been perpetually destroyed and rebuilt, leaving many Orcs refugees or strangers without a true homeland. As such, the strongholds serve an important purpose for Orcish society, allowing them to reimagine natures of kinship and relationships to the land. While the rest of continental *Skyrim* may be hostile or indifferent to Orcish strongholds, they are a slight refuge from the inhospitable lands that separate them from the cultivated, bountiful lands of the Nords. In accordance with the biologically situated differences of each, it is worth noting that there exists no midpoint or melding between these two extremes; an area is either an Orcish area, or it isn't. Strongholds are racially and culturally homogenous, especially when compared to the rest of the game's locales. The Orcish denizens of strongholds (and all Orcs, in general)

have guttural sounding names, and they all tend to worship Malacath, the Daedric prince of the outcast and ostracized—an implicit nod to colonizers’ interpretation of many Black and Indigenous communities’ religious practices as “Devil worship” (Cave, 1992, p. 15).

Players are unlikely to run into the strongholds unless they know about them beforehand, and they will be barred passage into them unless they are an Orc themselves or complete an introductory quest. In this way, there are both physical and knowledge barriers to overcome before gaining access to the non-White areas of the game. Upon arriving at a stronghold, a non-Orc player character will be greeted by an Orc telling them, “This is our stronghold. Here, we are free to live as Malacath intended, away from the prying eyes of the Nords. You’re not an Orc or Blood-Kin, so stay out. We only help our own” (*Skyrim*, 2013). Unless the player completes a quest for the guard or another prominent Orc anywhere else in the game, they will face hostility from the Orcish strongholds. For instance, Moth gro-Bagol, a blacksmith in the hold of Markarth tells the player character, “For your help, I’m sending word to the Orc strongholds that you’re to be trusted,” when the player completes a fetch quest for him. While this serves a helpful gameplay function, the player’s reaction to such a revelation may be that all the Orcs of *Skyrim* know each other, and that they operate as a sort of clandestine outer society. One member of the race speaking for all members of the race is a dynamic that is not repeated throughout the rest of the game. For other racial groups, players are liable to find individuals which transgress or disagree with their race’s consensus on political issues, as opposed to the Orcs, which are uniquely monolithic.

Encouraged Playstyles

Before delving into the main narrative of *Skyrim* and how this narrative excludes Black-coded bodies from participating in a political storyline, I would like to briefly discuss how *Skyrim* encourages its Orcish players to pursue a brutal warrior archetype. While *Skyrim*, unlike many other fantasy role-playing games, does not make use of a class system, there are still certain essentialized perks to playing each race. Additionally, because the game is often centered around prowess in combat, most of the skills are associated with fighting styles and martial archetypes. As the Bosmer are granted skill bonuses to their sneak, pickpocket, and archery skills, a player would be encouraged to play a certain archetype who makes more use of those enhanced abilities. Orcs’ natural bonuses skew towards melee combat, with bonuses to their smithing, enchanting, heavy armor, block, one-handed, and two-handed skills. All these skills fall under the game’s “Warrior” archetype, except for enchanting, which is often used in the creation of more powerful arms and armor. In addition, all races gain an activated “racial power,” a brief but powerful ability that can only be used at certain intervals. The Orcish ability “Berserker Rage” allows the player character to deal incredible physical damage while mitigating the damage they receive. All in all, by giving Orcish players inherent abilities related to physical, melee combat, *Skyrim* encourages an Orcish playstyle that focuses on overwhelming physical power and superior arms and armor. The game tells us as much in the character creation screen: “Orc troops in Heavy Armor [sic] are among the fin-

est in the Empire and are fearsome when using their Berserker Rage.” Though Orcish player characters are still able to shoot arrows, pick locks, and cast spells, the game implicitly and explicitly informs the player that their skills are best served in becoming masters of physical combat—an often brutal, bloody, and visceral affair in *Skyrim*.

In this way, I argue that magical power becomes another signifier for civil and cultural significance in the game. Most races in *Skyrim* gain at least a small bonus to one of the magical disciplines, while Orcs only gain bonuses to the magical skill associated with making stronger weapons. The ability to cast spells and pursue magical crafts is often figured as an academic approach. Formalized study of its varied disciplines takes place at the College of Winterhold, players gain access to new magic abilities through tomes and scrolls, and in general, the game draws on the significant history of wise, learned wizards in fictional worlds. Nord holds have prominent, named court wizards; Orc strongholds have generic, unnamed “wise women.” While court wizards at the major holds are responsible for teaching about and advising on magical affairs, wise women seemingly have no magical abilities, and they exist only to teach the player about Orcish society. In fact, of the eighty-or-so named Orcish characters in the game, only two are supposedly capable of casting spells. The others, more often than not, make their preference known for vicious, armed combat.

As such, I argue that the game treats magic as a signifier or representation of the mythology of superior European rationalism. While magic is often connotated to be mysterious and difficult to understand, the wizards of *Skyrim* are making a science of it—this science would naturally increase their military might. This considerable weapon is also figured as inaccessible to the “savage” populations of *Skyrim*, and it is certainly far superior to the lacking means of their traditional knowledge. In this way, I argue that magic begins to play into the myth of colonizers as “invincible, enjoying superiority in numbers and technology” (Cordell, 2003, p. 31). This assumption coalesces nicely with the manner in which the game treats its explicit themes of nationalism and imperialism, which I will touch on later.

When taken together, the patterns of gameplay and lore begin to coalesce. *Skyrim*, in dialogue with a long history of fantasy representations, posits Orcs as savage outsiders who have no place in Western notions of “civilization.” This representation is both Eurocentric and ahistorical, as Black and Indigenous cultures around the world lived in harmony with the land for centuries before colonialism and often assisted colonizers in adjusting to new environments (Iorns Magallanes, 2014). Compared to the Viking-like Nords and the Roma-like Khajit, the Orcs lack coherent referents to real life. The total effect, then, in a medieval world with clear demarcations, is a reconstructed history where BIPOC and subjects of the Black diaspora are figured as cultural holdouts of the supposed benefits of colonialism. Rather than emphasize Orcish resistance, Orcish adaptation and symbiosis with the land, or the cultural logic for what small tidbits of the Orcish lifestyle we have, the game echoes ahistorical, racist, and colonialist ideals of the Orcs as stubborn, backwards, and “primitive” (Young, 2015, p. 89). From the colonialist perspective of the game with which players are

meant to align, the Orcs of *Skryim* resist the benefits of acceptance into mainstream civilization (magic, sustainable food, protection from wild beasts). Indeed, this resistance is apparently inherent to their bodies. In the manner that non-player characters describe Orcish strongholds and Orcs, the boundaries between culture and biology are persistently blurred. When a non-Orc player character gains access to the strongholds, they are referred to as “Blood-Kin,” linking heritage and the body.

White, Xenophobic Politics of *Skryim*

As I have examined some of the implicit and explicit gameplay elements that inform players of every Orc’s innate “savage” nature, I now seek to explore what this does to the main storyline of the game. Though players never need to experience the primary narrative of *Skryim* and are free to explore the game as they wish, the fact that the main plot deals with imperialism, sovereignty, and racial supremacy is vital in understanding the player experience and how BIPOC characters are often situated in fantastic worlds. In essence, though one might imagine a place for Orcs in the thematic exploration of race, immigration, and nationhood, because the game succumbs to the same problems as past virtual medievalisms, there is no place for Black-coded characters. Because the game does not see Black-coded non-player characters as fit to participate in the narratives of nationalism, identity, and multiculturalism, they are absent from major storylines, thus giving the impression that such issues impact only White people in White settings. Perhaps, as Gilroy (2007) informs us, a consequence of the homogenized Black culture means that “black political struggles are construed as somehow automatically *expressive* of the...ethnic differences with which they are associated” (p. 31). The Orcs could not assert an opinion on the political drama that begins unfolding in the game, as this isn’t meant to be a game about Orcs. Thus, the racialized bodies of the Orcs are erased from the sorts of historical narratives with which the audience might implicitly associate them, creating caricatures that are complicit in their dehumanization.

My prime example for this point is the secondary quest of the game, which concerns the civil war across *Skryim*. Because the player likely cannot complete the main questline of the game without taking a side in the war, the questlines become intertwined, and chances are high that almost every player of *Skryim* has played through this quest series at least once. Though the threads that make up the causes of the civil war are slightly convoluted, and some players may not necessarily interact with each side of the conflict, I will do my best to briefly describe it here. The belligerents of the conflict are the Stormcloaks, a largely Nord contingency that fights for independence under Jarl Ulfric Stormcloak, and the Imperial Legion, the military arm of the Empire. Owing to a conflict with the elven supremacists of the Aldmeri Dominion, the Empire has outlawed the worship of a beloved Nord deity, increasing tensions between the Nord population and their would-be Imperial overlords. Before the game begins, conflict had been relegated to isolated incidents, but the player has the choice to join either side and work towards a bloody solution. While many of *Skryim*’s denizens are concerned about increasing control by the Empire, they are also concerned about Jarl Ulfric’s

reputation as a radical ethno-nationalist. Many non-player Stormcloaks will ask the player if they are a “*Skyrim* for the Nords type,” meaning *Skyrim only* for the Nords.

While the player is free to join either side and switch to the other if they are not enjoying their experience, it is worth noting that racism, imperialism, and cultural sovereignty are depicted as conflicts between the Roman-like White races and the Viking-like White race. Though Orcs are revered by the Legion for their battle prowess (if not their culture and historical alliances), their participation in geopolitical struggles is nonexistent in *Skyrim*. White nationalists easily find entrance into the narrative because they can “identify themselves with the Stormcloaks and the Nords, or their struggle against the Septim Empire—a multicultural institution, that unite people of all races and creeds” (Bjørkelo, 2020). Others may find the narratives and ideals of the Septim Empire more enticing, but it is doubtless that they exhibit colonial ideals and utter disdain for those who live outside the Empire as “savages.” There may be the odd, randomly generated Orc in either army, but Orcish leaders in their strongholds offer no voice lines or concerns about the conflict. While the player character’s quest to end the conflict will take them all over the continent, the noncitizen Orcs are never mentioned as potential allies, obstacles, or participants in the dominant narratives of colonialism and imperialism. In this way, Orcs are effectively removed from the main plot of the game, further giving the race a feeling of disinterest in the same ideas which have effectively branded them as outlaws and savages in the land. Here, the limits of the game’s dialogue system are apparent. Because no voice lines give the Orcs of *Skyrim* a stake in the themes of the game, I interpret this silencing as an oversight of the developers. The implication is clear: Black-coded characters have no place in a medieval setting, even one that deals with themes that are incredibly salient to the Orcish or Black person’s experiences in societies undergirded by White supremacist ideals.

It is this treatment that implicitly marks the game as “apolitical” in its fanbase. Here, in the modding community, I wish to draw attention to the paradoxes of fantastic representation come to life; fantasy is a “form that makes use of both the fantastic mode, to produce the impossibilities, and the mimetic, to reproduce the familiar” (Attebery, 2004, p. 309). Through attempting to represent the imprecise dynamic of real-world racial politics with formalized, essentialized rules, *Skyrim* obscures which part of its racialized world is intended as pure fantasy and which is representation. *Skyrim*, like many popular games that center Eurocentric ideas and themes, is seen as an artifact that offers a reprieve from politicized world around us. Part of the effect of recontextualizing and reconstructing the medieval in such fantasy games is arguing that history is apolitical and unbiased. *Skyrim* contributes to this discourse, though it attempts to tackle racism and nationalism in realistic ways. Because the imagined audience of *Skyrim* is a young White man, Bethesda is able to disconnect the aesthetic, symbolic, and thematic equivalents of the events of *Skyrim* and her people from any real-world equivalents. In this way, ignoring the way that real cultures and peoples map on

to the people of *Skryim* allows harmful gameplay elements and their parallels (racial essentialism, Whiteness equaling “civilized,” etc.) to slip through unmarked by players. Because showing the Orcs of *Skryim* as having opinions about the conflicts or the racism shown towards them would make the game “political” in the eyes of its fanbase, such potential storylines and characters are abandoned, leaving us with Black-coded bodies that are seemingly complicit or content in their relegation to second-class denizens.

Modding and Player Agency

Naturally, players’ engagement with these themes and the lessons they will take from them are dependent on how players choose to play the game. As compared to the literature dealing with MMORPGs, an individual player is solely responsible for mediating their own experience. Contrary to the social experience offered by *World of Warcraft* or *Everquest* (Verant Interactive, 1999), players are alone in the world of *Skryim*, meaning that their immersion and their internal construction of a cohesive narrative for their avatar is their own. Modding, based on the verb “modify,” is a slang term that refers to individual or freelance developers creating software for established games that changes aspects of the gameplay. Modding is legal, encouraged by Bethesda, and easily accessible on websites like nexusmods.com, as many modders are capable of fixing bugs and improving overall gameplay. Modders and the mods they create can change graphics, add music, or change entire sections, atmospheres, and non-player characters entirely. They can grant new character options or change how the game functions at its core. While some players use mods for humorous purposes, others employ them as a means to seriously impact the game in a way that increases their immersion and agency, further blurring the lines between creator and consumer. Modding, as a natural extension of the player agency afforded in an open-world game like *Skryim*, allows us an interesting glance into how players conceive of and respond to the racial representations and dynamics present.

Though an in-depth analysis of modding as an artform would likely extend beyond the frame of this essay, it is worth considering what popular mods about Orcs and racism in *Skryim* tell us about the community. The most prevalent variety of mod for the Orcs are mods that change their appearance. As argued by psychoanalyst and race scholar Michelle Stephens (2014), our understanding of what is human has been accompanied by an “epistemic shift in understanding the human body in terms of physiognomy rather than anatomy” (p. 12). As such, it shouldn’t surprise us that many of these mods brand themselves as efforts to make Orcs more beautiful, or at least less ugly, by editing Orsimer facial structure and organs to more align with their Nord and Elf counterparts. One author characterizes their efforts as changing “creepy orc facial geometry to look less piglike and more lively” (“Orc uglyfication the way to have less ugly orcs”, 2012)². There are mods to make the Orcs a more brutal race, increasing their size, height, and overall power even further. Other efforts brand themselves as attempts at “feminizing” the female Orcs, giving them new standing and running animations that differ from their male counterparts or removing some of the definition

from their muscles. Similarly, other mods seek to eliminate the (often gendered) imbalance between Orcs and the other races of *Skyrim*—adding new areas and mechanics or allowing Orcs to wear the hairstyles of the “human” races and vice versa.

Figure 3: A “beautiful” modded Orc (From “Metalsabers...”)



Figure 4: Standard Skyrim Orc (*Thuraya Salaris*)



Figure 5: Standard Oblivion Orc (*SerCenKing*)

However, the most common sort of mod for the Orc simply puts more Orcs in the game, either in the form of followers or generic, wandering NPCs. Many of these additions are romanceable, fully voiced, and given backstories. Though most creators do not delve into the racial dynamics of this paper, many cite a simple desire to encounter more varied peoples in the game.

In addition to these race-specific mods, there are other interesting mods which seek to solve how racism functions in in-game dialogue. Rather than eliminating dialogue that refers to the player character’s race or dialogue that uses slurs and stereotypes, these sorts of mods

attempt to make the racism in the game more consistent. That is to say, they add non-player characters that are more often racist or xenophobic, in accordance with how they believe the world presents itself. One modder, finding the racism in the supposedly bigoted city of Windhelm lackluster, added NPCs with various levels of bigotry (“More Racism in Windhelm”, 2017). Others in the community, desirous of their Argonian and Khajit avatars to be mistreated in accordance with Ulfric’s decrees against them, added hostile NPCs that will attempt to prevent the character from entering Windhelm (“Inconsequential NPCs”, 2013). For some players, their immersion in the game depends on such volatile language being consistent. So, if there is a supposedly xenophobic city or NPC, these sorts of players believe that there should be prioritized triggers or voice lines that signify this information. Others just want their choice of race to be acknowledged more often by NPCs. One player, referring to NPCs who share a race with their avatar, said “It’s funny playing as a Dunmer in Dragonborn. She’s so ignorant of her own culture. Such as when she had to ask the priest what an ancestral tomb was in order to get the quest to rid it of ash spawn. Her last name’s Veloth. She has an ancestral tomb in Vvardenfell!” (Kadzait, 2013). As Kadzait had pictured their avatar as belonging to a traditional family with ties to the homeland of her race, it disrupted their immersion that they were forced to ask a priest of the same race about information that would clearly be known to her.

Comments like this show how racism (or the lack of racism) in the game can disrupt the narratives that players have created for their avatars. Kadzait, in crafting a narrative within the game world, was suddenly shunted from that narrative by the game’s lack of dialogue options that sufficiently described how their character might react. While it is safe to assume that racist or imperialist dialogue in the game is placed there (by developers or modders) in the name of verisimilitude, I am more interested in what the existence of these sorts of mods mean for players. Succinctly, mods related to the racial depictions and racist dialogue in the game represent attempts at forming a cohesive relationship between the races of *Skyrim* and elucidating those races’ relationships to the races of the real world. When modders want more sexualized female Orcs in the game, or when they want more accessible “humanized” Orcs, it shows us that they are interpreting Orcs as an “Other” due to their understanding of the game world. When players want more consistent racism in-game, it shows that they find racist dialogue a realistic part of the game that they want to further interact with. All in all, these are telltale signs of latent understandings of race in the game world, and the fact that Orcs have historically been essentialized as the savage or uncivilized Black or Indigenous person should inform our study of virtual worlds. Increasingly, it seems that players are dealing with “recognition that reimaginings of the Middle Ages are essentially fantasies built upon fantasies,” though the pursuit of fantasies in *Skyrim* have as much to do with racial politics as they do an idyllic Middle Age (Pugh & Weisl, 2012, p. 3). Whether players understand it or not, the storylines of the game and the narratives that they build around them are interacting with attempts at representing the racism of our real world, dynamically building on and reshaping our understanding of Whiteness, Blackness, civilization, and savage.

Conclusion

I have attempted to form a broad introduction into the racial dynamics of a single-player fantasy role-playing game. While scholars have dissected the signs and interactions which form our understandings of Orcs and other Black-coded bodies in MMORPGs, *Skyrim*'s open-world playstyle, versatile gameplay, and modding community allow for ample opportunities in discovering how gamers understand and interact with virtualized races. From the combat-centric mechanics of the game to its narratives of White, Viking oppression and nationalism, the game consistently forms a monolith of the Black-coded bodies it chooses to represent. As opposed to the clear parallels that some races of *Skyrim* have to real-life cultures, the Orcs are presented as a generic, savage, hypermasculine Other; the effect results in players knowing that they are encountering racist representations that homogenize the varied experiences and cultures of Black diasporans while allowing such mimesis still to be marketable and defensible from scrutiny.

Hopefully, by tracing the representations of the Orc from Tolkien to *Skyrim*, scholars can draw conclusions about what these varied and constant signifiers mean for players and fans of the genre. While the Orcs of *Skyrim* are not inherently "evil" in the same sense that Tolkien's are, continuing the representations of them as inherently physically strong, demon worshipping, and resistant to the benevolence of "civilization" cues the assumed audience into how they should feel about the racial dynamics of *Skyrim*. Moreover, the pattern serves to recontextualize an ahistorical treatment of the colonial subject and racial Other. This pattern and modality go further than the fantastic movies and television series that destroy the Black body and ask it to later "haunt" its narratives, as *Skyrim* places racialized bodies in historical narratives that implicitly erase their Black counterparts from the themes of imperialism and colonialism (E. Thomas, 2020, p. 27). As the proper scholarly White people of *Skyrim* seem to be indifferent to the Orcish encampments on the margins of the continent, *Skyrim* subtly perpetuates an ahistorical narrative of Black complicity in colonialization and racial subjugation. The Orcs of *Skyrim* cannot speak for themselves—as many of the writers, developers, and voice actors do not represent any possible referent. In this way, *Skyrim* becomes another step in a pattern in which "an ethno-class attributed to itself to 'possess' or embody the truth of what Human is and means" (Mignolo, 2015, p.122). Through this dynamic, the game subtly reifies a worldview of colonialism as virtuous and justified. By framing the game's races as inherently skilled or cultured in certain ways, the player intuitively supposes that conflict between these races is inevitable. As such, the Orcs (and other persecuted peoples) of *Skyrim* are waiting to be colonized by the player or cultures in the game. Moreover, such representations erase the bodies and cultures that realistically would exist within and between the seeming extremes of this virtual world. Without blends of art, architecture, or prominent mixed-race characters, *Skyrim* inevitably portrays colonialism as necessary to the development of "humanity" and a grim reality of living in a harsh environment.

Endnotes

1 I use this term in order to demonstrate that *Skyrim* is often incoherent and muddled in its racial signifiers. That is to say, Orcs juxtaposed to the White-coded races of the game are often assembled of mixed symbols that refer to both Black and Indigenous cultures, and such assemblages are defined more by their juxtaposition than any coherent culture we can draw from such signs. Though I more often distinguish Orcs as directly coded as Black, this term is helpful in showing how *Skyrim* distills all non-Whiteness into a single set of characters.

2 Many authors of mods do not give a name or username. Other mods are such large, collaborative projects that listing their names by alphabetization or importance would be exhaustive, if not impossible. I have given the names of the mods, instead.

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