Text, Language & Literature of Fictional Worlds

Analysis of the language of Skyrim and Roleplaying Video Games

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Abstract

Kielentutkimus videopeleissä on usein keskittynyt pelien positiiviseen rooliin kielten oppimisessa. Kun peleistä on tullut suurempia ja kunnianhimoisempia, monet niistä ovat kehittyneet fiktiivisiksi maailmoiksi, ja tämä on yleisintä roolipeleissä. Nämä maailmat pyrkivät heijastamaan oman elämämme piirteitä historiasta kulttuuriin, ja suurista yksityiskohdista myös pieniin asioihin. Jos nämä maailmat on pyritty rakentamaan oman yhteiskuntamme ja historiamme kaltaisiksi, niitä tulee olla mahdollista myös tutkia samoin metodein. Kielentutkimuksen kannalta tämä tarkoittaa mm. Pelimaailman tekstien tutkimusta, merkityksen havainnointia visuaalisessa suunnittelussa, sekä kielen moninaista kirjoa pelimaailman puheessa, kirjoituksessa, tai monikielisyydessä. Tavoitteeni tutkimuksessa onkin selvittää, kuinka hyvin sovellettavissa kielentutkimus on fiktiivisiin pelimaailmoihin, niin suljetuissa konteksteissa, kuin laajemmissa mittakaavoissa pelimaailmojen sisällä.

Tämä tutkimus on suoritettu sisältöanalyysin metodein, sillä se on koettu parhaaksi tavaksi tarkastella suurta otantaa pelimaailman annista mahdollisimman monipuolisesti. Tutkimukseen valittu peli on vuoden 2011 *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, joka on roolipelisarjan viides osa. Pelin tärkeimmät kriteerit olivat ns. "hiekkalaatikko" lähestyminen (vapaus edetä omaa tahtia), maailman perspektiivi (ensimmäinen persoona, eli hahmon silmin), sekä maailman monipuolisuus tutkimustavoitteiden kannalta, kuten esimerkiksi: Miten kieli esiintyy eri muodoissa pelin sisällä? Esiintyykö maailmassa tyylieroja pelin kirjojen sisällä? Miten pelin rotujen kulttuurierot saattavat vaikuttaa puhetyyleihin?

Koska maailma on valtava, on näiden esimerkkien pystyttävä kuvastamaan omia kategorioitaan mahdollisimman hyvin. Tärkeimpänä teemana on yhdistää oikean maailman tutkimusta kielen ja tekstin esiintymisestä fiktiiviseen ympäristöön. Kielen keskeisen roolin tutkiminen näissä peliympäristöissä voi mahdollistaa pelimaailmojen laajemman tutkimisen uudenlaisesta näkökulmasta, tuoden kulttuurista lisäarvoa alalle, joka edelleen nähdään vahvasti vain viihteellisestä perspektiivistä.

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1 INTRODUCTION

The concept of "world building" is the process of crafting a fictional world from the various parts that would make up our own world. It is the creation of narrative present in a world's visual design, cultural norms (and their differences), of languages and religions, and so much more. As fictional worlds mimic features of our own worlds, it is not so strange that the worlds of fantasy roleplaying (video) games also draw heavily from the juggernauts of the genre. One of the heads of the fabled *Ultima* series had everything from *Dungeons and Dragons* to *Lord of the Rings* (Kocurek 2024, p. 19), to inspire the creation of their own worlds to adventure within. Another name that has stood strong through the years in the world of roleplaying video games is Bethesda Softworks's own *The Elder Scrolls* series. Their initial success with games such as *Daggerfall* (1996) and *Morrowind* (2002) helped make them a renowned name across roleplaying game enthusiasts. Their fifth game of *Skyrim* (2011), to this day is held in high regard as one of the finest roleplaying video games ever made, seeing numerous re-releases, and fan content from countless talented enjoyers of the franchise. The reasoning behind choosing this genre, and *Skyrim* in particular for this thesis, will be covered in greater detail in Chapter 2.1..

The question, then, is why? What has made the world of Skyrim (or Tamriel, as would be appropriate) so enthralling to players? The key feature, I wish to argue, is exactly the careful world building involved, and in particular, the role that *language* as a concept plays as a core feature in both the development, and the gameplay aspect, as a cornerstone of the world building in these games. To elaborate on this claim, we must ask how well do we understand and appreciate the depth of the language used within (roleplaying) video games? This is the core question which this thesis seeks to answer, to analyse the various forms language takes in Skyrim, and how it is used to present the history and cultures in the game, through means similar to our own.

In this thesis, I will initially cover the backgrounds of studying language in these artificial settings, and the study of video games as a medium in Chapter 2. Next, I will go in depth into the most important forms of language study relevant to this kind of analysis, which will be covered in Chapter 3.

Finally, I will present examples from Skyrim's game world, with analysis of the various features of language functions and intentions. This is done in Chapter 4, which is also the most extensive part of this thesis, as it goes over the example materials from the game. The different areas of language use will first be explored separately and then be wrapped up into an example where the various elements all work together. At the end of the thesis, Chapter 5 covers the discussion of the process, the results, and the reflection on the paper itself and its findings.

2   BACKGROUND

The study of language has spread out to meet many kinds of purposes, from not only the more obvious application of learning how to write and to speak and to read, but also in understanding the role that language serves to us. In one example of language study, Anstey and Bull (2018) note in their study of multiliteracy that:

"in order to be literate, individuals need to be familiar with, and to engage with, paper (the writ-ten word), live (face-to-face) and digital texts used across a range of contexts." (p. 57)

In the context of studying digital environments for their incorporation of language, then, would be to expose oneself to a medium of multiliteracy. Similarly, we have study groups that tie closely to the different appearances of language even further, where we might study phenomena such as icons and texts, where the study of language becomes almost akin to an analysis of the wider world, of society and art and design. The study of language has developed quickly to encompass various themes alongside other fields, such as those focusing on societies in the studies of McCormack, Wurm & Wurm (2011), like how language shapes between social classes, and the study of cultures, exemplified in the work Risager (2006), in the studies of language shift between cultures. It is not a surprise either, as they are all very interlocking fields, and it would be easy to include even elements such as political or economic movements here (but we shall not). Instead, there is another, perhaps more material, development that has gripped our lives quite significantly over the last few decades, and that is the technological. Particularly, here I am talking of the emergence of the computer, and the digital environments it has spawned, from chat forums to social media platforms, and to virtual entertainment in the form of grander and larger games. It would then come as no surprise that we find these games as a source of inspiration and motivation, whether for our professional or scholarly pursuits. For a researcher, the objective becomes to consider these fictional worlds for study similar to the ways we study real world phenomena (or close enough), as settings that have intrigue and history. A task sure enough to demand the analysis of many facets of

language, be they literature, cultural variation, and the effects they play on the fictional societies, towns, and individuals.

2.1 Study of the Artificial World

Worlds of fiction have, of course, existed for a long time in various forms, from artistic depictions on canvas and mural, to stories written on paper and equivalents. They have appeared increasingly on film and television as well, but video games in particular have, since their inception in the 1980s and in their rapid evolution afterwards, offered something of a particularly immersive way to perceive these worlds of fiction. In games, worlds can at once be experienced visually, interpreted via their music and sounds, as well as be explored through direct action via the gameplay interaction elements. It is this first-hand immersion of game worlds that lets them offer a unique viewpoint into their settings. Wolf and Perron (2014, p. 454) have extensively studied the various aspects of games as a medium, such as exploring the ever-illusive concept of video game immersion, the idea of allowing the self to believe these spaces as living worlds. Wolf (2012, p. 155) himself must also be recognised in full, for his depiction of the parts of fictional worlds like the *cultures* and *languages*, is a truly valuable tool for this thesis in guiding the study of artificial worlds as if they were real.

Now, as with all products of media and entertainment, games too come in many varieties. They range from realistic to cartoony, to those which aim to reflect historical motifs to those taking full liberties into worlds of fiction. Game genres are also quite prevalent, from strategy games to simulations, to roleplaying games. For the purpose of lending a single cohesive anchor for this thesis, I found that choosing just one game which encompasses all of the desired themes would be optimal. This I narrowed down to a fictional setting (as these demand the full world-building process), and for a medieval fantasy setting (as opposed to modern day or sci-fi. This was due to offering on games, as well as approachability). I finally settled on solely using Bethesda Game Studios's *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (henceforth primarily referenced as simply *Skyrim*

within the thesis). A game from 2011, *Skyrim* is an expansive game taking place within the fictional world of Tamriel, and the fifth main game in the titular *Elder Scrolls* series. For this thesis, it has a few aspects which were the most ideal for the analysis. It is a "sandbox" game, meaning it largely does not restrict the player in what they wish to do at any time, but encourages freeform exploration of the world. Secondly, it is one of the few such roleplaying games that are in first-person. As such, a larger emphasis must be placed in the smallest details of areas, as players are able to examine each corner and object more closely than a third-person camera would allow. Finally, the *Elder Scrolls* games have a long history (both in the games, and as a series), and a reputation for "immersive" elements such as readable books, owned player housing, non-player character routines and more. They allow a player considerable freedom, often presenting their worlds as fully open experiences as soon as a short tutorial level is played, and place very few restrictions on where the player may go and what they may wish to do. Thus, it felt a particularly expansive and balanced game for the themes of this study.

2.2   Studying Video Games

The study of fictional worlds such as those in novels, films, or for this thesis, of video games, often gets left behind in language analysis. Oftentimes the study of games is focused on themes of teaching the players skills or teaching them information, whether it is problem solving or language learning. Wolf (2012, p. 2) has regarded this as almost a blindspot for researchers, where these massive worlds created by developers and storytellers are often ignored or merely glanced at in favour of more common topics. But game worlds in particular present themselves with curious challenges, as they are quite a bit different from landscapes of our own world, requiring a certain affinity for games to at least approach, and then the mind to explore these settings.

Wolf (2012, p. 2) attributes the difficulty of study as to why fictional worlds are left without greater focus. This might certainly be true, given the breadth of expertise or at least familiarity required to tackle the different facilities of world building.

This idea of imaginary worlds formed of blocks is not all too different from our own. To expand on this idea as mentioned previously, here's an initial example, along with the reference of the related themes. If you consider that this virtual world has buildings, then everything about those buildings (from their exterior to interior, decorating and furniture) should essentially serve a purpose, the "spatial text" of the "what it is" and "is for" as described by Ravelli and McMurtie (2016, p. 21). Creators of fictional worlds would be tasked with all the responsibility of ensuring the "denotation and connotations of text" always come through clearly enough (Ravelli & McMurtie, 2016, p. 28). Thus, whether being experienced by an ordinary person playing the game for entertainment, or someone hypothetically doing research on such a world, the texts within the game world would require analysis as both "real" and "fictional" materials. McCrudden, Magliano & Schraw (2016, p. 126) describe the process of reading texts as a search for semantic connections, and both discovering new information and the discovery of links to the old. Within a fictional world, this process would then ask the player to ponder the place of these elements in the game's own setting, and how they compare to the real world as well.

What lies at the core of studying a fictional world of a roleplaying game in particular is that, unlike our own cultures, or even the imaginary creations that our societies have created, such a world is to be believable as a real place at each turn. All of the people, programmed non-player characters as they are, must be convincing stand-ins as individuals of the place, their homes lived in, their books cohesive and their thoughts varied. The intended function and illusion, as Wolf (2012, p. 12) too mentions, therefore requires a different kind of mindset from more traditional media study. With the interactivity of video games and their potential for optional content to be discover, even the idea that a player can discover, by chance, "unrelated" hints of the world's story (Wolf 2012, p. 200), is rather unheard of, and often impossible, for other media to replicate. These optional materials then become a resource of sorts in themselves

for players. The general purpose is to provide cohesion of the world around them (McCrudden et al 2016, p. 129), as the various books, monuments and characters become interpreted both as set dressing as well as small tidbits of background knowledge purely for the sake of immersion and curiosity.

As in our own world, fictional worlds often enjoy the benefits of continual storytelling as well, as they are added upon by sequels and spin-off works, in a sense crafting history as the passing of time would for our own events. As Wolf (2012, p. 249) points out, however, this then demands careful consistency from the fictional worlds, as it has to be maintained by creators, rather than being a fact of existence as in our own history (disregarding false accounts and misinterpretation). This notion should be taken with importance, given the commitment and interest players would have time and time again, and thus the familiarity of the material (McCrudden et al. 2016, p. 129). Thus, for both the effort of the creators to craft these "living" fictional worlds, and the experiences of the people playing them, they should be regarded as settings deserving of careful and thoughtful analysis.

3 THEORIES OF RELEVANT LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS

In this thesis, the role of language in the creation and establishing of virtual worlds, using a fantasy roleplaying game is the subject of examination. To this end, I will seek to establish the basics of what the relevant terms are exactly, from texts and indexicality (, meaning and function in visual design from a language perspective, and the study of spoken language and written literature. I have opted to cover these first in a smaller context, as a means of establishing the frames from which the analysis of *Skyrim*'s world will be done in Chapter 4.

3.1 Concept of Texts

In literary theory, the term Text itself is used to signify any object in a world that can, in some form, be read. The common understanding would immediately recognise this as works of literature, whether simple signs, text messages, or full newspaper articles and books. However, the applications of text go much further than this, and can be attributed to anything which carries some kind of inherent meaning or purpose, such as the categories of *icons* and *indexes* (Scollon & Scollon, 2003, pp. 25-27). Icons represent non-literary images with inherent or implied meanings, such as bathroom, telephone or gas station signs. Indexes, in turn, are specifying markers that give further context and clues to the icon's meaning, such as directional signs. Both icons and indexes, thus, can be attributed also as forms of text analysis, where the signs themselves are the text to be read and interpreted.

Understanding texts as they appear requires us also to be consider them as subjects which have been made with purpose, but which come under scrutiny often by numerous individuals who may or may not belong to the "intended" target audience, leading to the interpretation of the initial text to become something that changes constantly. Sometimes this change is perceived by only a single individual, and at other

times the interpretation is instead changed as a whole to reflect the perception of an entire group or culture. Michéle & Geoff (2018, pp. 80-82), present these features in a chapter focused on the multimodality of text and their semiotic systems. They present an image where the developmental steps are visualised, with the focus for us being particularly the multimodal features of texts, such as the *purpose, audience and contextual resources* and *literacy identity*. An example is made of our current era of content creation for the internet. More of us have become creators than ever before, but in addition to this meaning that more of us are able to create vast varieties of works, we also become exposed to the reality that our intended design may be vastly different based on who consumes our creations. How will an image, a tweet or a video be interpreted by a certain age group, or those of a certain culture, or difference of opinion, or any number of individuals. These examples affect creations made for content sharing spaces, but they do also have a significant importance in public spaces as well.

For the study of texts in any capacity, it is also good to have not only a set of tools for the analysis, but also the correct perspective of the analysis process. One such guideline is presented in detail by McCrudden et al (2016, pp. 58-60), regarding the types of knowledge that are presented, with some useful example categories being *spatial layout* and *compositional structures* . The chapter on the large is designed to provide the explanation as well as the means for the reader analysis of texts. As text is one of the many parts that make the world of a roleplaying game work, it is an important subject to internalise ahead of the analysis to come later.

3.2   Meaning in Visual Design and Architecture

In another example I wish to present the themes of visual implication and design, and look at visual design, and the overall importance of both design and function within texts. Much like the aforementioned icons, visual design as a whole is an area where an implicit meaning is carried out through the intended design of the creator.

Recognising design as an integral part of intent is important, for visual elements of even written text, as noted by David Machin (2014, p. 7), are numerous, ranging from font choice, to colour, and the chosen base for the print itself. A flower shop might include flowers and fancy fonts to draw more attention to their signs and notices, perhaps a sign of wood with an elaborate metal outline. A car repair shop on the other hand might emphasise more industrial and mechanical themes, and depending on the shop's aesthetic, might not mind a slight buildup of rust on the sign either. These would be the kinds of things relevant to the themes of visual design, and present both intended and permitted effects. Later in the analysis of the game itself, these factors will be considered through the lens of an entirely constructed space, where even the natural transformative effects will have been artificially decided.

Beyond just visual design, there is an area where the study of a game world's semiotic elements presents very interesting opportunities, and that is in the study of architecture as a semiotic property, as a communicative element of language in culture. Neil Leach (1997, pp. 173-174) refers to the ideas of Umberto Eco in their book, with some examples made here being from this explanation. The framing idea of architecture as a semiotic subject is considering its importance in fields of both function and design, and how these are balanced, or favoured, with the intended implementations of the finished product. For applying semiotics in this manner, in Leach's book (1997) it is said that:

> if it aims to provide keys to the cultural phenomena in this field, is whether it is possible to interpret functions as having something to do with communication" (p. 174)

Leach (1997) then goes on to say that beginning to apply meaning and function to different aspects in architecture beyond just the most obvious will enable us to then "discover other types of functionality, which are just as essential but which a straight functionalist interpretation keeps one from perceiving." (p. 174)

Of particular note in this thesis will be the study of particular design features within a video game setting, which in this particular field Leach coins as *Architectural*

Denotation (1997, p. 177). Just as in the real world, a game's world faces constant questions on how it is to present potential options to obstacles, and in which ways these can be solved. Leach's book makes an example that, while they all share the same intended purpose on the surface, "steps in a garden or a grand staircase by Vanvitelli" (1997, p. 177) are just two of the examples that, when glanced at, clearly present a purpose; that of going up, functions that are often made obvious, but may still be presented in numerous different ways, and much more so once we eventually get to the possibilities of artificial settings.

Similarly, architectural connotation is explained as a highly important idea of multiple functions, of the implied and the observed, and how both design and purpose can fulfil these. Using the functionality of a throne as a seat, Leach (1997) comes to the conclusion that these are often poor chairs in terms of comfort, but instead convey an air of grandeur, and as a particular kind of seat, their function "to seat one is only one of the functions of the throne—and only one of its meanings, the first but not the most important." (p. 179) The emphasis on these architectural themes is due to the importance they have in terms of communicating design and cultures in a game setting as diverse as an open fantasy world.

3.3   Study of Spoken Language and Literature

In our own world, language plays an important in our cultures and our societies. When translating such a notion to a world of fiction, there is often a compromise that must be made. Whatever the most common language of a world might be (such as *Common* in *Dungeons and Dragons*, *Galactic Basic* of *Star Wars*, or *Tamrielic* of *the Elder Scrolls*) will often be the language of the reader or player. English, German, Chinese or Arabic are just some examples. In addition to this, a world would feature other fictional languages for variety. Sometimes these have full translations too, such as the Elvish language of Tolkien's works. To study language in a fictional setting, thus, is to study how fictional languages are constructed, and interwoven with a 'core' language, to ground them in context for the one immersing themselves to these worlds.

One particular aspect that sets interactive media aside from media that is merely enjoyed via exposure (such as movies or music) is the existence of literature, in particular as side content or "fluff". Even action video games might have readable notebooks, but it is in roleplaying games where these are in vast supply. If one watches a show on a streaming service, as an example, they can merely wonder what the books on a character's bookshelf would be. In a game, where one is free to do as they please, these books can be interactable objects. Thus, it raises the question of how is literature represented within fictional universes? How do genres represent themselves within a fictional setting. Later, I will look at a few examples directly (as well as make references to more), in an effort to answer these questions as well.

4   RESEARCHING SKYRIM: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The process of analysing the world of a video game is, at its fundamental level, similar to studying society in our own world. We look at how our towns are built and how the purpose and culture reflects in these designs. We can listen to different people speak and how history may have had a part in the shaping of these languages and language practices. We can look into the kinds of books we have, how different genres present themselves, such as whether they are for entertainment or learning.

In this chapter, I will apply the language study theories into Skyrim's world, using a diverse set of themes and accompanying examples to present how the game seeks to present its world as a real, living environment. The method chosen for the research in this chapter is thus: I have done gameplay of Skyrim with a researcher's mindset, to pay attention to the environments, characters and dialogue, and the various items and events within the game. Of these I have taken either notes or screencaptures (or screenshots). From this selection I have selected those which best exemplify the features of the desired themes of the thesis (such as variety in spoken language, genres in literature and so forth). Given the scope of the game, a majority of the research material has been left out, as the thesis focuses on covering as many unique themes, rather than one singular area of language.

As one final note to avoid confusion, within these chapters I refer heavily to both *Skyrim (*the game) and Skyrim, the in-game province (and culture).

4.1 Video Game Worlds as Research Subjects

In the real world, features of language, text and semiotics can be separated between those that have developed naturally (patterns of language for example), and those that have been deliberately designed (art, architecture, crafted things in general). By comparison, every aspect of a video game's world, no matter its connection to the real world counterpart, has to be designed by hand and consideration. This isn't so much a block to the application of linguistic analysis to the setting, but it presents a particular circumstance that must be taken into account at every point of the study.

To better understand how and why these design decisions are made for the world of a video game, it is important to also understand some core principles of the game design process. This will then serve us as a helpful set of tools alongside our semiotic resources, in a sense being the second half of the whole in this thesis that is linguistic analysis methods on the design of a virtual setting. Here, I will borrow examples from Macklin and Sharp (2016, pp. 118-119), who present the development of Ivan Holm's design values, such as the aesthetic, social and traditional, and further go to create a link and correlation to some crucial game design aspects of game design. Of these listed, the most important for this thesis are *experience*, *theme* and *point of view*. These all tie directly to the intentions of the created game as a setting, and how this is realised from the designer perspective, and the desired results of how the player will come to meet these decisions during play.

Another useful concept for the studying of games, and very relevant for this thesis, is *Spatial Discourse Analysis.* This concept by Ravelli & McMurtrie (2016, p. 2), is highly useful for the study of games as settings to be analysed, and how their design reflects this. In short, it focuses more on the thematic design of game worlds, rather than the technological aspects of it. This new form of discourse analysis lends itself to a more multimodal approach, or the meaning-making of texts. This once again is in the context of studying both the figurative and particularly the literal building blocks of game worlds, and focuses on more intricate areas such as dimensionality, decorations and texture to name a few.

However, I do not wish to give the idea that the study of a game world will only focus on the solid building blocks that make this artificial creation appear as a living entity. For a world to be believable, it requires "living" (so to speak) factors in it as well. In a game, these are typically various Non-Player Characters (or NPCs). As is the case with the real world as well, people come in many different varieties. In a fictional roleplaying game however, these varieties are often of stark diversity, consisting of different races with features more exaggerated and distinct than the human cultures of our world. Within the game world of this analysis, Skyrim, the fantasy setting is inhabited by different human and elf cultures, along with a set of what the game calls "beast" races such as orcs, as well as cat- and lizard-people. The reason to make note of this is simple; just as in our world, different cultures can (and often do) have different ways of communication and behaviour, something a fictional depiction in particular can play with more openly. How will a member of a certain race act on their own? How about their relations to other races, or if their culture and language use have been affected by the dominant Tamrielic culture? The study of in-game languages will look at themes such as the traits of one's native culture (Anstey & Bull, 2018, p. 53) or adopting of a foreign language for migrants (Risager, 2006, p. 96). I will also cover the implementation of fictional languages as a tool of world building and enrichment (Wolf, 2012, p. 184).

4.2 Visual Designs

Just about every video game around is a piece of visual media, barring perhaps the very earliest text-based games of the 1980s. With games taking place at some point in real history, there is a benefit to being able to copy and produce renders of real buildings and architectural styles. For games set in fiction, of course, these elements of designs must instead be all new, fitting with the cohesive themes of the relevant

cultures and styles of their in-universe. The styles are often first realised in concept arts and booklets, and then remain consistent with the storytelling mentions of their designs (such as within in-universe literature and mentions in dialogue). Furthermore, as games have evolved, it has become possible to be more expressive with designs (*Elder Scrolls Arena* in 1994 and *Daggerfall* in 1996 had very simple architecture due to the rudimentary technology). I would also note here that, in some open world games, it is not uncommon to come across terms such as "procedurally generated". This stands for games where essentially a nigh endless expanse of space is possible as the world is created by an algorithm. Such worlds are often however lacking in their individual details, as they are focused more on the environment rather than the moment-to-moment immersion. *Skyrim* does not employ these kinds of mechanics, and so I will give the consideration with each detail in the worlds that they have been handcrafted to appear as they are in the game world.

I had previously discussed these themes within this thesis, in both the subject of texts (chapter 3.1.) and the importance of visual design and architecture (chapter 3.2.). Delving into these visual themes now, I will look into the designs of *Skyrim*'s world from a few examples. These are the larger environmental setpieces of its towns and cities, as well as individual establishments within them. As we have previously established at the start (in chapter 4.1.), the idea of designing all of these spaces in fiction is to design something that emulates reality, even when it is all handcrafted with the full liberty of the game's artists and world designers. Thus, every aspect from the world surrounding every landmark and object, to the exterior designs and interior decorations of buildings, would have been carefully made with considerations for their inhabitants, the cultures building them, the wealth of their societies and owners, and so forth.

4.2.1 Environmental and City Designs

Cities throughout history have largely focused themselves around several important natural features, with the most common feature being vicinity to fresh water

and/or navigable waterways. Likewise, larger settlements have often been established among easily defensible spots, and in the vicinity of swathes of land suitable for agriculture. In this first example is one of the most prominent cities of the province of Skyrim, known as Whiterun, the capitol of Whiterun Hold.

Example 1 – City & Surroundings

The city (example 1) is a walled and fortified settlement build around a rocky hill, overlooking a vast expanse of fields and tundra. It is also located right next to a large river, which in-game comes from a large lake further south, as well as several smaller streams from the mountains. Thus, the city itself has been built upon the most prominent and tallest point of a relatively flat region, providing a defensible position, while supporting enough fertility for several lands (as seen in example 1.). In this screenshot of the city, I have sought to capture the compositional elements (Kress, 2006, p. 177) that make up the city's most prominent features, such as the prominent city standing high from the environment (salience), the fertility of the river and farmland (information) and the overall effect of the landscape, of the flat tundra and the tall mountains (framing). It is thanks to the framing, for instance, that one can immediately spot the city from a distance. In-universe, Whiterun is also considered one of

the wealthiest of Skyrim's holds, situated as it is at the center of the province and so acting as a trading hub. How this all is presented and witnessed will be looked at next.

Example 2 – Internal City Design

Whiterun proper is, as previously established, a walled city primarily focused on commerce. As such, the main district of the town is devoted entirely to trade and travel. Not only does the city have one of the largest selection of shops in any of Skyrim's towns, but a bustling open marketplace as well. Shopkeepers are shouting to attract customers, comparing prices, and citizens flaunt their wealth, while some concern themselves with the frosty weather and these effects on their crops. Skyrim is, after all, Tamriel's northernmost province. As the busiest spot in the city, it is also possible to see and hear the different townsfolk, their roles often recognised on the spot in a way Scollon & Wong (2003, p. 107) describe as spotting the signs that individuals wear and present of themselves through the method of indexicality, or the act of recognising signs and contexts. A close look at example 2 above would show, for instance, a person in rags, one in a full cloak, and an apron wearing lady behind a counter. Thus, the player may quickly interpret these NPCs as a beggar, a cleric or a scholar, and a shopkeeper.

We can attribute this indexicality not just to the citizens, but also to the layered construction of Whiterun itself. As the city has been built upon a hill, the levels of the city present a clear hierarchy (example 2). There are three different districts within the city, each established with a different level of prestige and importance. Upon the lowermost city part are the shops, and the most simple houses. This is where the trade clearly happens. Thus, it can be assumed it is the busiest and noisiest part. The second level holds the much larger houses, some akin to mansions almost, as well as the city's temples, and an esteemed guild of warriors. Finally, one can see the imposing presence of the Jarl's palace standing highest of all, the only building in the tallest district. Totten (2014, p. 268) points out that a concrete cultural basis for the cities in *Lord of the Rings,* and the differences implemented into each culture helps to explain the believability, of these cities. Here I have shown only Whiterun, a city where the central hill acts as a narrative element, but there are others as well. The city of Riften is a fishing town and so built and incorporated into the lake via canals and docks. Meanwhile, the city of Solitude is a merchant town closely tied to Tamriel's Empire, and so it is the most modern of Skyrim's towns, with more central European styled castles rather than Skyrim's commonly Nordic. They serve, as Totten (2014, p. 272) describes, to act as a means of conveying the narrative of these locations, in this case with the overarching visual designs of each location.

4.2.2   Interior Designs

The topic of designing interior spaces faces some differences from the exteriors discussed above. Interior spaces are often much more personalised and functional in nature, as they do not need to portray natural formations. They do, however, still need to present themselves as believable spaces within a roleplaying game, to fulfill the illusion of their in-world purpose. For the purposes of this thesis, the examples I will present come from commercial locations (a shop, and a museum), rather than private residences, as these examples will act as better representations of the design features, rather than Skyrim's numerous houses and cottages.

Example 3 – General Goods Store
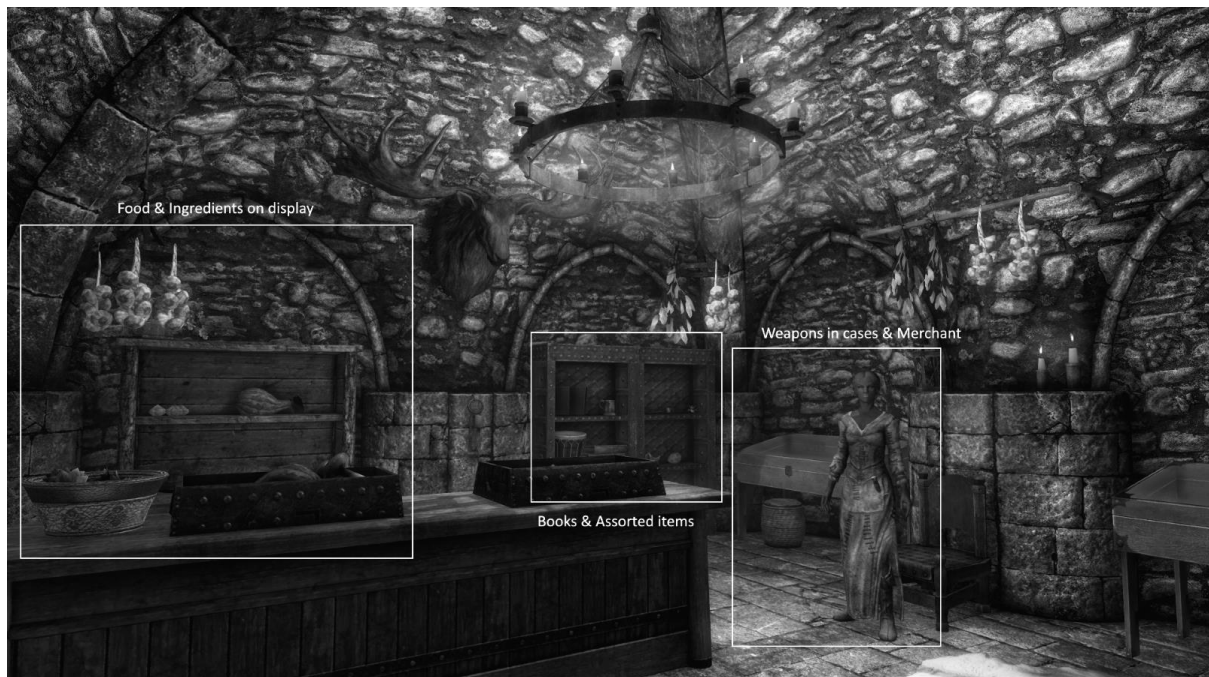
The aforementioned design principles of culture, wealth and purpose exist in the designs of Skyrim's many indoor locations as well as the larger exterior designs. For the purpose of demonstrating this, I've picked two more social locations within two

different cities. The first one of these is fairly straightforward in its depiction, a general goods store in the busy port town of Solitude (example 3). Solitude is considered the most modern of Skyrim's cities, and as such its buildings are all sturdy stonework and brick, with spacious interiors and relatively little in terms of traditional Nordic architecture. Within these fantasy videogames, the idea of a "general goods" store in turn associates itself to miscellaneous items such as food, potions, books as well as weapons and armour. Within the shop space depicted above, a player can see all of these items on display as well. Dried foods and goods hanging on racks, and more dangerous or valuable items such as jewelry and swords kept in locked glass cabinets.

Example 4 – Museum (of Cultural History)
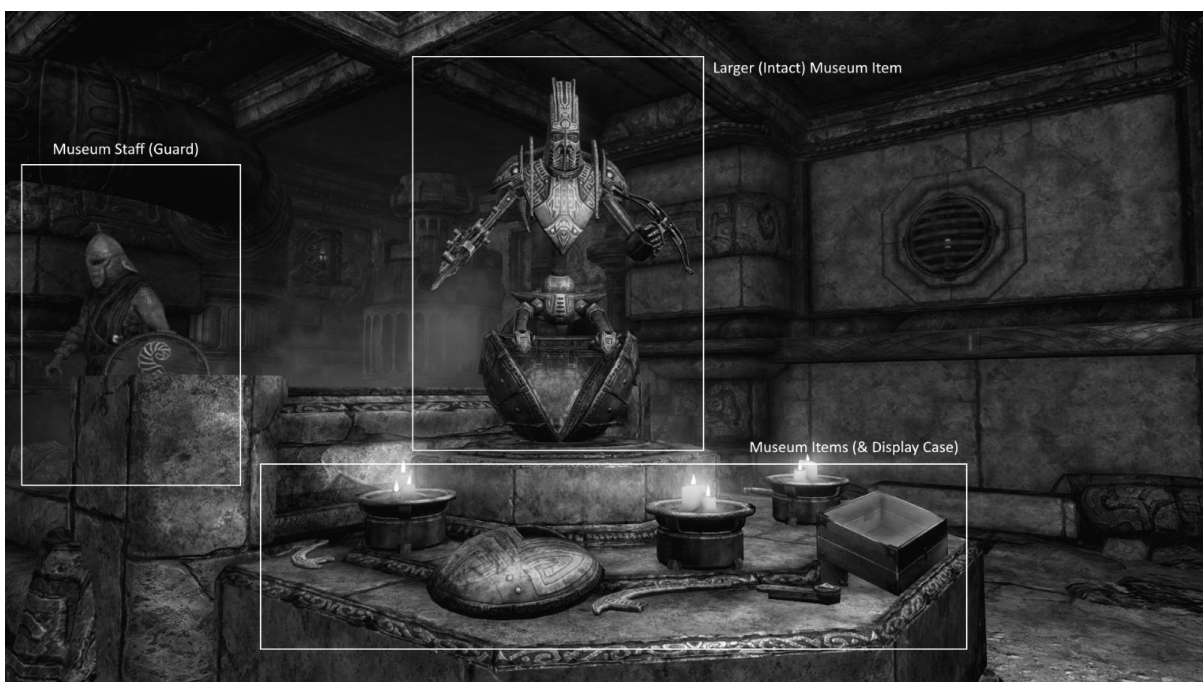
There are more curious establishments to be found in Skyrim as well, rather than just shops which would act as commodities to players. One of Skyrim's cities is the mountain settlement of Markarth, built in the ruins of what was once a home to a now-lost race of dwarves (though the Tamrielic depiction is another variety of elf, rather than the common Tolkienic sort). The ruins and mysteries of these dwarves is a subject

of high intrigue to many scholars in the world, and as such it is no surprise that they have a dedicated museum within the city of Markarth.

The museum itself, like the city as a whole, is of the dwarven make, and thus its construction is completely different to any of the other towns, with stone slabs and metal work, as well as ancient machinery. In addition, within the museum are many pedestals with relics recovered from the ruins (example 4). These include mundane items such as building struts and plates of automata, as well as curious pieces placed within glass cabinets. The museum also includes, at a few parts, books a player can read which detail the history of the dwarves and their study, some of these books even written by the museum's owner. Entry into this museum is gained as part of a quest reward in the game. There is, therefore, no monetary value to the space, but the value instead can be on the experience, the engagement offered by the space (Ravelli & McMurtrie, 2016, p. 75). On the whole, it is a private collection of artifacts, as the only ways to gain entry to this museum are by gaining the aforementioned key from the owner as a quest reward, or breaking in via lockpicking. Even the layout of the museum, with the displays, statues and patrolling guards, makes sense when one considers it is the location of an optional Thieves' Guild mission. It follows thus the design of being made for a specific gameplay encounter as described by Totten (2014, p. 306). Yet, it is disguised perfectly as a believable museum space. Of course, the player knows on entry it is a museum, not only because the game says so, but because it shows it. It has little in the ways of significant gameplay purpose, as its affordances for player interaction (Macklin & Sharp, 2016, p. 91) are instead on the narrative side.

4.3   Spoken Language in a Fictional World

I previously presented the general notion of how *Skyrim* only employs one real world language to use as its "common" (English, German, French etc.) tongue in chapter 3.3. As explained there, it is a practice that's used often for media in which fictional

languages are present, to give the viewers, readers and players an anchor point to approach these worlds from. In *The Elder Scrolls* series (and thus in *Skyrim* too) most races and cultures speak and are recorded with this "*Tamrielic*" language. Still, the world does make some uses of fictional languages developed for the enrichment of the setting. While not all of the species included speak their own tongue, and indeed there's no true, fully fledged out language for even those who mix in words of their own fictional tongues, it is still important to take a look at these instances of mixed languages within the game.

Despite coming from different nations, cultures and backgrounds, just about every character within the realm of Skyrim speaks this aforementioned Tamrielic language, its name derived from the name of the primary continent itself, Tamriel. Tamrielic serves the role of the typical universal language that every race has become to speak most of the time. In gameplay terms, it is often the player's own language, and so more of a mechanical element to serve the game and its player. In terms of the world, just about every race does also have their own language, but these are rarely if ever spoken, and are mostly saved for references within in-game literature. However, the implication that this is not a native tongue for all is still present, as some races such as the reptilian Argonians and the feline Khajiit have very particular ways of speech and expression. One of the key themes in the first half of this section is looking into the broad theme of how non-native speakers use the dominant cultural language (Sanchez et al, 1998, p. 317). While a majority of the races all speak this Tamrielic in a native manner, some still retain elements of their own culture or their own language within their use of words or their mannerisms in speech to varying degrees.

In this segment, I'll go steadily over examples of the minor instances of language proficiency and variation tied to different in-game species, and then to those which mix in actual uses of their own languages to provide a sort of artificial bilingual appearance to different characters. Finally, I will look at the most drastic part, where *Skyrim* uses its very own made-up language in various ways to construct and support a culture and timeline for the setting.

4.3.1   Cultural Variation in Language Use

There are three distinct differences from the cast of playable races that stand out from this norm however. Firstly, there are the so-called beast races of the game, the cat-like Khajiit and the reptilian Argonians. Also, the enigmatic Dark Elves, or "Dunmer", of the northeastern Morrowind province. The beast races can be grouped together in this instance, as neither one of them truly speak their own language within the game. They do, however, speak with their own particular methods, the sort that would in fictional settings often signify a foreigner, taking a particular way of speaking that might be more common within their own language.

Example 5 – Argonian speech & Naming
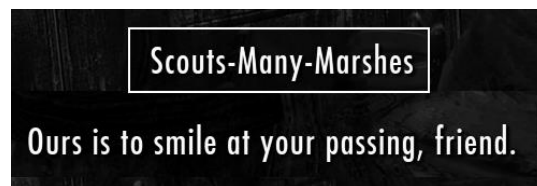
The Argonians, a race of lizardfolk with similarities to the Native American cultures (of Central and South America in particular), have adapted their speech mostly to the common Tamrielic. Their naming, however, sees a phenomena where some use names in their own language (such as Veezara or Jaree-Ra), but it is also common for them to use what are known as "Tamrielic Names", essentially translated to the language generally spoken (example 5, name in box). This practice is not too dissimilar to the attempted translations of some Native American names in the past or in media, and within *Skyrim* it can be taken also as an example of "code preference" (Norris & Maier, 2014, pp. 70-71). These Argonians have opted to translate the names of their native language to better fit-in amongst the dominant cultures of the regions they have migrated to, an effort to perhaps better fit into the culture around them (McCormack

24

et al, 2011, p. 148). Alternatively, these names can be nicknames, or even derogatory in nature. As the Argonians are considered the most alien and different from the major Tamrielic cultures. This suggests at the discrimination shown towards them, while not official and largely based on individual prejudice, still constitutes as cultural domination by the larger Tamrielic Empire, and the effects it has on the Argonians and their own language practices (McCormack et al, 2011, p. 311).

Example 6 – Khajiit speech
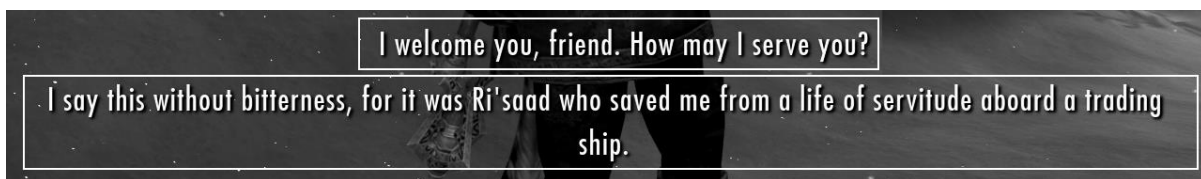
The cat-like Khajiit, who's culture in Tamriel takes elements from South Asian cultures, have their speech come across as more defined by tradition and focused on certain nuances (example 6) rather than being too common, while having a hint of the aforementioned "foreignness" in a popular media sense to add to their exotic nature. It could be possible to interpret their way of speaking as transferring the use of their native language features to Tamrielic (Risager, 2006, p. 95), but as there is no actual spoken Khajiit language featured in the game, this remains as largely hypothetical reasoning. If we attribute their way of speaking to language difference, then this could also be an instance of non-standard language speech (compare to Non-Standard English or NSE), as the Khajiit hold a role of travelling foreigners in many of Tamriel's provinces, thus having a weaker cultural connection to the wider Imperial (of Tamriel's Empire) culture and language practices. The Khajiit would, however, have the motivation to learn Tamrielic even at a basic level to better enable them to trade outside their own province (Risager, 2006, p. 96). In their speech, the Khajiit are prone to speaking of themselves in the third person, or in other monikers, using phrases such as or "Khajiit wishes you well", examples of their speech being adjusted by their own unique traits, (Anstey & Bull, 2018, p. 53). Dark Elves of Tamriel stand out with a bit more of a bilingual focus, as they have the most developed secondary language of all the races. This owes to them being the focus of the third game in the series, *The Elder*
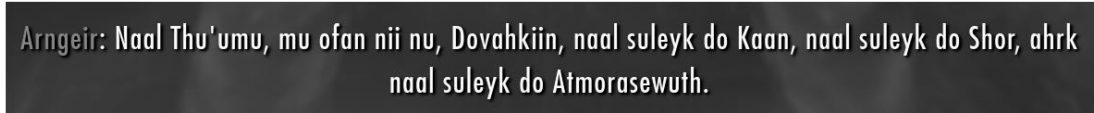
Scrolls III: Morrowind, where the Dark Elves could have their own culture represented heavily. In *Skyrim*, there are still opportunities to explore this in the base game and also in its expansion. Here, the particular is the very pop-culture way of showing off their own language. They like to mix in words of their own language even while speaking Tamrielic, with words of endearment and expletives being the most significant and common. While perhaps more nuanced and refined than many races, they do not portray any particularly significant features otherwise, at least in *Skyrim.*

4.3.2   Dragon Language – Tool for Immersion, Timeline, and More
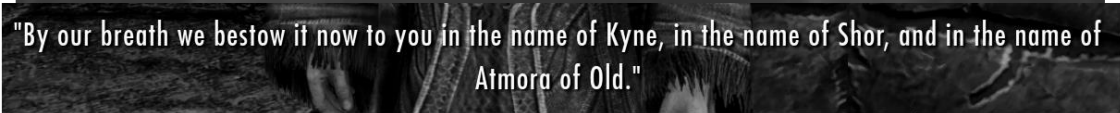
Skyrim introduces a wholly original language, the ancient Dragon Tongue, which serves numerous important uses in worldbuilding within the game specifically. It is, as described by Wolf (2012, p. 184), a constructed language, a fictional speech made for a fictional culture. A fictional language adds to the depth of *Skyrim*'s world and its history and lets us study how much effort the designers have put into making this fictional language seem realistic. The Dragon Language is no longer a truly alive language at the time the game takes place, having instead existed long centuries before, a time in the game's narrative when dragons themselves were also alive. However, given the opportunities present in a fantasy game to play around with time (via means of magic and so forth), and with unnatural phenomena so common in fantasy settings, *Skyrim* is able to mix in the Dragon Language in a few ways. As the player would explore tombs belonging to ancient dragon worshipping clans, for example, they will be attacked by the mummified remains of these people, who make threats and taunts exclusively in the dragon language. Similarly, a key player ability is tied to learning words in the dragon language to use them in powerful Shout skills, an ability that has the player character audibly use from one to three words of the dragon language, with each word consistent to their use in dialogue and lore. This follows fantasy traditions, where certain languages have magical potency in the spoken word alone, or when uttered by the right individuals (Wolf, 2012, p. 185).

When it comes to linking a fictional language to a real one, consistency is the key element. Examples for either option are Tolkien's elvish language, carefully developed for use in the narratives and auxiliary materials of his books. In *World of Warcraft*, all playable races theoretically have their own languages, but when used in the in-game chat by players, automated generators are used to provide the "translations". In *Skyrim*, the dragon language is closer to Tolkien's works, as the language is depicted many times in the game.

<p style="text-align:center">Example 7 – Translations & Consistency</p>

Arngeir: Naal Thu'umu, mu ofan nii nu, Dovahkiin, naal suleyk do Kaan, naal suleyk do Shor, ahrk naal suleyk do Atmorasewuth.

"By our breath we bestow it now to you in the name of Kyne, in the name of Shor, and in the name of Atmora of Old."

They see me as master. Wuth. Onik. Old and wise. It is true I am old...

Here, I have collected several examples of how the dragon language is presented within *Skyrim*'s dialogue. The first two dialogue boxes of example 7 above are the speech and direct translation by one NPC. In these examples, it is possible to see the direct translation a recognisable word (a proper noun) from one language to the next (goddess Kyne is referred to as Kaan), and also the grammatical differences (Atmora of Old is now a singular word). Furthermore, as depicted with the third prompt, the player can now easily associate the word "wuth" for "old" in the dragon language, as the game remembers its use between two characters.

<p style="text-align:center">Example 8 – Translations & Consistency</p>

> Paarthurnax: Aaah... yes! Sossedov los mul. The dragonblood runs strong in you. It is long since I had the pleasure of speech with one of my own kind.
>
> So. You have made your way here, to me. No easy task for a joor... mortal. Even for one of Dovah Sos. Dragonblood.

Both the last dialogue in example 7, and the two selections above in example 8 are spoken by a dragon, an in-game native of the fictional dragon language, and so they pepper their speech with a mixture of their own language and the game's default player language (English in this case). Their speech thus mixes the languages together, at times for direct translations, but also letting the player make the translations themselves. Grammatical differences based on context are also displayed here, such as how in example 2 "Dragonblood" is phrased differently between the two uses. Wolf (2012) describes the depth of fictional languages as follows:

> Invented languages serve several purposes in imaginary worlds. They can introduce new concepts, objects, or beings that otherwise have no words for them. (p. 184)

For Skyrim, this dragon language is presented as something keenly tied to the history of the province. Undead ghouls of old crypts have their speech done only via this language rather than Tamrielic. Meanwhile, ancient dragons adjust their native tongue with something that the player's character (and thus the player) would understand, while providing translations for a player to learn from. The classic narrative teaching tools of show and tell (Herman & Vervaeck, 2019, p. 14) are utilised with the language as well, as it is incorporated into the world via telling (translated by NPCs to the player) and via showing (the meanings of draconic runes, or the effects of Shouts by the player and dragons alike).

4.4 Literature

Games have included varying levels of reading over the years, from paper manuals found within the game cases that are full of important information for both gameplay and potential stories and backgrounds, to those materials that are found in the games themselves. The importance of engaging with these materials has also changed quite a bit, as in the past it was just about necessary to read external materials like game manuals to know how games work or what their story is, but nowadays few games at all even come with manuals, as everything is conveyed in-game, from control pop-ups, and for actual reading small notes and reports that a player can connect have become commonplace. There are, however, some distinct games which offer surprisingly substantial amounts of reading for a player to familiarise themselves with, while often being materials that are entirely optional in nature. As an example, the *Civilization* game series offers their in-game "Civilopedia", which provides summarised explanations and descriptions of the many historical buildings, peoples and leaders, achievements and technological developments of our own world. I want, therefore, to go over some of the most prominent of genres here, along with the examples of how they are represented by the literature of Tamriel as it appears in *Skyrim*.

Example 9 – Historic Literature

n the Merethic Era, when Ysgramor first set foot on Tamriel, his people brought with them a faith that worshipped animal gods. Certain scholars believe these primitive people actually worshipped the divines as we know them, just in the form of these totem animals. They deified the hawk, wolf, snake, moth, owl, whale, bear, fox, and the dragon.

Every now and then you can stumble across the broken stone totems in the farther reaches of Skyrim.

Foremost among all animals was the dragon. In the ancient Nordic tongue it was drah-gkon. Occasionally the term dov-rha is used, but the language or derivation of that is not known. Using either name was forbidden to all except the dragon priests. Grand temples were built to

Orienting then to the world of *Skyrim* and *The Elder Scrolls* series as a whole, the developers and writers at Bethesda have worked to fill the world with numerous in-game books that the player is able to come across, collect, and read at their leisure. Cross-referencing some online resources for an accurate number is difficult, but according to one source, there are approximately a staggering 337 unique books found in the game world of *Skyrim*, with an additional 150 or so pieces of notes and journals then on top of that. It should be noted here that, naturally, these books are not equivalent to our own literature, and instead can vary in page count from under ten to some dozens, but hardly reach the counts of many hundreds. This is a common practice in providing a realistic summary of countless historical narratives for a setting, told with a low narrative resolution (Wolf, 2012, p. 202). This, along with the abundance of book genres featured, shapes player expectations and interests for their content, developing their reader strategies, as (McCrudden et al, 2016, p. 22). Among the many genres of Tamriel's books are varieties such as exploration guides, fairy tales and legends,

political pieces and even erotic tales rife with innuendos. A historical book (example 9) tells, for example, of the historic movements of people, their religions at the time, and how they are understood at the present (of the book's writing). There are books to cover historical records of the world, a twin series where one tells of the biography of a great queen of the past, while another is more of a dramatic telling of her life. All of these examples are comprised of several books, and as complete series form some of the longest "singular works" of writing within the game. The important note is that the books are never once required for progression or completion when playing the game for its gameplay alone. They, along with the many other parts covered in this work, instead serve as crucial parts for crafting a believable world, where books would be everywhere, for every purpose and want, and by many very different kinds of authors. They exist to provide narrative for the seen and unseen parts of the world (Wolf, 2012, p. 201), done with further immersion as they are materials found within this fictional world, rather than being external to it.

Example 10 – Poetic Literature

calling the holy warriors to
battle
    To answer villainy's shield
with justice's spear,
    To steel themselves to fight
at the front and be brave.
    Rangidil too grasped his
shield and his thin ebon
spear
    And the clamor of battle
began with a resounding
crash
    To shake the clouds down
from the sky.
    The shield wall was

smashed and blood staunched
    The ground of the field, a
battle like no other
    Of Morrowind
    To destroy the evil of
Ebernanit.

    The maniacal horde were
skilled at arms, for certes,
    But the three holy fists of
Mother, Lord, and Wizard
(4) pushed
    The monster's army back in
charge after charge.
    Rangidil saw from above,

Example 11 – Reference Explanations

Geocrates Varnus explains:
    (1) "The Horror" refers to
the daedra prince Mehrunes
Dagon.
    (2) "Fifty winters"
suggests that the epic was
written fifty years after the
Siege of Ebernanit, which
took place in 3E 150.
    (3) "Thrice-blessed
Rangidil" is Rangidil Ketil,
born 2E 803, died 3E 195.
He was the commander of the
Temple Ordinators, and
"thrice-blessed" by being

blessed by the Tribunal of
Gods.
    (4) "Mother, Lord, and
Wizard" refers to the
Tribunal of Almalexia, Vivec,
and Sotha Sil.
    (5) "Dagoth Thras" was a
powerful daedra-worshipper
of unknown origin who
declared himself the heir of
the Sixth House, though there
is little evidence he descended
from the vanished family.

Example 12 – Choose-Your-Own-Adventure Book

2

Kolb took his favorite axe and shield and walked to the pass, where he found a cold cave, a windy cave, and a narrow trail.

Enter the cold cave (17)
Enter the windy cave (8)
Walk up the trail (12)

3

Kolb stepped onto a rocky hill. He could see the dragon sleeping below, and a tavern off a road nearby.

Climb down (16)
Visit tavern (14)
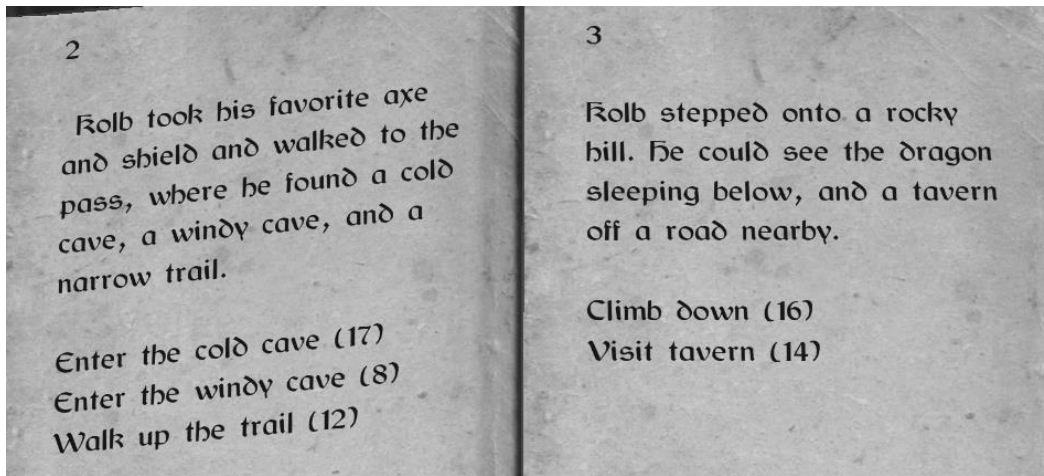
The previous example (9) was for a historical novel, which could still be considered important information to outline in-universe the history of a fictional world. This way, the timeline and cultural developments are made clear for players as they play the game, rather than having to rely on external sources. However, a majority of the books found in *Skyrim*'s gameworld take an approach that is more curious than that.

Example 10 above is taken from a book depicting a historical legend of Tamriel, which is told in a more poetic style. Firstly, it should be noted that having books in more creative genres than straightforward historical explanations aids in enriching the world's literary practice on its own. I want to also draw attention to another literary practice in example 10. On the second page, one of the verses is marked with a (4). This is because this book has in-universe references made by a scholar, found upon the last opening (example 11). This is not a common practice in all of the books within the game, and so it marks this book as something which has passed some kind of editorial or revising process by academic scholars.

There are also opportunities for the designers to include curiosities within the game world, such as the book *Kolb & the Dragon* found in *Skyrim* (example 12), which

is a choose-your-own-adventure book found in the world. A piece of entertainment in Tamriel's world, as well as a nod to a genre from our own modern age.

Already in chapter 4.2.2. I presented the existence of museums and researchers within Skyrim (rather than merely being unseen background characters). Sometimes, while playing the game, a player comes to know that these books not only exist in numerous varieties, but that their writers and readers exist within the game's world as well. They are, therefore, a concrete resource tied into the game's universe, rather than just an expository element that appears only to the player alone. In this next, final chapter of analysing the elements of *Skyrim*'s world, I will also go over the integration of Skyrim's scholars and academic figures into the gameplay experience, and the world itself.

4.5 Elements Coming Together

So far, I have gone through examples of language, of architecture and visual design, and as well as in-game literature within *Skyrim*'s world in largely individual cases, so that these themes and categories would be better understood within their immediate context. Of course, these elements of design and worldbuilding do not exist within a vacuum except for when looking at them purely from a list of items, or as images captured in post. As in our own world, items, themes and decisions are interconnected, and form a larger whole, a statement that I would argue is all the more accurate in a world that has been entirely created, and as such the purpose of each decision is planned for carefully. While the previous entries in *The Elder Scrolls* series had more limited resources of the game's many areas of side content for example (reportedly a single person designed all of the previous game's optional caves and dungeons), in *Skyrim* the variety of design shows much more strongly. Ruins, tunnels, mines and hideouts most of the time have unique designs, and little side-stories that exist only for players to interpret, without carrying a heavier purpose later on. They
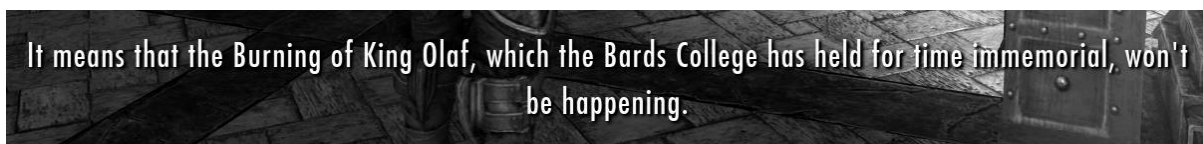
are, in essence, some of the best places to look at the full combination of the previous elements. In this section I will go over some examples that I think best represent how these design features all work together to form a greater whole. Some examples will come from the aforementioned dungeons, and others instead will come from towns and other, more peaceful or 'natural' locations within the game world.

4.6 Burning of King Olaf, and the Surrounding History and Culture

Something that does exemplify well the depth of *Skyrim*'s game world is a quest series tied to the "*Burning of King Olaf Festival.*" This section will focus on the layers of how this one quest, and event as a whole, ties into the various aspects of Skyrim's cultural features discussed above, to the history of its language and events, and the visual elements at play. It encapsulates the multiple narrative threads, both optional to the quest and optional interactions in general, that Wolf (2012, p. 200) describes as something enabled by the interactivity of the game medium.

As soon as the first entry into the city of Solitude, it is possible for the player to hear about the lack of a festival this year, with citizens simply lamenting the fact, while merchants being worried that they might not have a chance to sell their artisan goods there. All of these are just a few examples of optional threads of narrative given in digression, as described by

Example 13 – Festival traditions mentioned

It means that the Burning of King Olaf, which the Bards College has held for time immemorial, won't be happening.

Within the game, the Burning of King Olaf is a national celebration of the city of Solitude, where an effigy is burnt as a celebration against tyranny and false kings. However, due to the unstable political situation the game takes place in, the festival has been banned. It is part of a questline, then, to see that the celebration can be held. The primary party concerned with the banned event is the city's cultural scholars of the Bards' College (artists of all sorts, such as poets and songwriters). They serve as a very direct representation of how Skyrim's (and Tamriel's) culture is maintained within the universe, and throughout the world the distinct element of the region's culture (Wolf, 2012, p. 182) are the bards and writers graduating from the college. Their headmaster laments the situation to the player (example 13), hinting at the long tradition of the festival. The only solution, it seems, is to remind the local ruler of how historically significant the festival is. The fascinating thing about it all is how multilayered this event truly is, as shall be covered.

Example 14 – Historian's telling of a legend

from a combination of injury and sheer exhaustion. Somehow - and this detail is conspicuously absent in virtually every account - Olaf manages to convey the dragon all the way back to the capital city of Whiterun.

The people of Whiterun are suitably impressed with Olaf's hostage. They build a huge stone holding cell at the rear of the palace, which they rename "Dragonsreach". This

enormous cell serves as Numinex's prison until his death.

Olaf himself eventually becomes the High King of Skyrim, putting an end to the war of succession. Presumably, his great deed made him the only leader upon whom all the people could agree, and so the land once again has peace.

As a visitor to Skyrim, I find

A player might have had the chance to read a book called "Olaf and the Dragon" (example 14) found in numerous places in the game world, detailing a legend from history. The book itself also has the writer's commentary at the end, with the writer in question even being a character in-game, and an associate of the Bards' College. They recognise their scholarly alignment as an outsider to Skyrim's history and culture (Sanchez-Macarro et al, 1998, p. 120), and make their commentaries in the book from this perspective. The book also plays a part into the history of the city of Whiterun and its castle (see chapter 4.2.1). In another literary example, the player and the headmaster reconstruct a historical poem during the quest, told in slow and methodical verse.

Example 15 – Festival in progress

At the culmination of the questline, the event is brought back, and indeed plays out within the town. Characters such as merchants who had previously been concerned with the festival's absence will appear selling their goods there. There are both students of the college and citizens of the town in attendance, each of whom have dialogue now befitting the unique event. The festival itself can only happen this one time, if the player has helped enable it. The titular burning of the king's puppet (example 15) itself accompanied by a fitting speech by the head of the Bards' College ends the formal part.

The festival as a whole seems then to reward greatly an *explorer's* mindset for seeking out the experiences through the optional and the interactable (Macklin & Sharp, 2016, pp. 99-100), tying together various references in dialogue and literature. In just this one questline, the game hints at history through optional novels and authors, lets the player interact with the artists who make and maintain culture and history, and the origins of these practices within the game's own world (Wolf, 2012, p. 183).

5   DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

Over the course of this thesis, I have sought to use language as a tool to analyse the various parts that make up the vast fictional worlds of interactive media. As (potentially) the most important part of any society, and as the part which exists at the centre of how we perceive and understand our surroundings, the use of pre-existing theories relating to language study were thus chosen. These worlds demand of their creators (individuals and teams alike) a commitment to creating something that is new yet believable. Whether designing their visuals, their cultures, or their use of spoken language and written literature, they are expected to be <u>consistent</u> throughout. A variety of topics were picked to analyse this hypothesis, from the study of texts to represent language as a general communicative system, to the way environments are interpreted through their functional and visual elements, to then language as it is understood traditionally as forms of spoken language and written literature.

In my analysis, I found that the developers of *Skyrim* had often paid close attention to numerous different details, which speaks of the care put into the world building, as no doubt the dialogue, the books, and the environments all had different teams working on them, and thus consistency had to be maintained with a larger group of people. For example, *Skyrim*'s exterior and interior designs are made with clear messages of intended function and interpretation, with the visual elements of city and housing design reflecting the characters. Language use displays several different kinds of cultural variation, based on the origins and lives of the individuals in the game world. *Skyrim*'s own fictional language also has a depth to it that deserves some commendation, as it not only has its own words, but a sense of grammar, as words change form based on context. I also want to highlight the variety of *Skyrim*'s literature, which was one of the key factors for choosing this game. The idea of a game having several hundred different books within it, items that serve no gameplay progression purpose, and yet they come in numerous genres and styles, exemplifies the

possibilities present in this kind of interactive medium for a truly rich representation of language implementation.

We often consider the language within games as a tool for learning and teaching, while easily disregarding the depth these games go to in order to emulate real world phenomena in spoken language, in written literature, or in cultural representation in general. I would refer back to Wolf (2012) in chapter 2.2, and to the reasons this kind of study is not as uncommon. It demands not only the knowledge to analyse these settings, but also the affinity to play these kinds of games. These are often singleplayer games and thus they rely more on the efforts of the analysts themselves, rather than studying the thoughts of other gamers. At the core of these gameplay experiences is always the game world itself. A comprehensive world of fiction achieves its status through different cultures which are separate by language and dialect. Literature which shows genres as we are familiar, from fairy tales to history to guides and political works. These are the kinds of things that should push the worlds of roleplaying video games into the forefront of further language analysis.

The study of fictional settings through the tools of language analysis, and the study of societies, is most certainly possible. It is a field where acknowledgements must be made for the artificiality of these spaces, as an aspect that is both a limitation (in terms of natural developments) and an enabler for chance (creativity, channelling inspiration of real societal phenomena). At the very beginning I noted language as being a key connector in our lives, and our cultures. Its central role for studying these worlds of fiction as well serves to uncover just how realistic they are in their depictions. Books and films have managed to capture our imaginations and immersions before through their depictions of worlds beyond our own. Now, video games can offer that with the layer of interactivity, of allowing us to test the depths of those worlds, and first-hand see the efforts that the creators behind these games go to.

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