IN ANOTHER TIME WITH (AN)OTHER RACE: REPRESENTATIONS OF RACE AND

NATIONAL NARRATIVES IN ELDER SCROLLS V: SKYRIM AND FALLOUT 3

by

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Abstract

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The video games *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* and *Fallout 3* provide simulations of systems of racial marginalization within the context of competing narratives of nation. By utilizing Ian Bogost's concept of unit operations in concert with postcolonial theorists Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak it is possible to see how these games perpetuate discourses of the human Western Self and the non-human racial Other. Despite the limitations in the simulation presented in these games, they reflect how video games offer the potential for simulating real-life systems of discrimination and marginalization.

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Introduction

Gaming Complexities

It is estimated that in 2013 the global video game market generated $93 billion in profits (Gartner Web). No longer confined to personal computers or gaming systems like Microsoft's Xbox, Sony's PlayStation, or the Nintendo Wii, video games of all kinds-- simple ones like a *Solitaire* simulation that harken to the earliest iterations of the form, to complex online multiplayer role playing games like *World of Warcraft*--have become a ubiquitous presence in American culture. This level of consumption provides strong evidence that the old stereotype of gamers, the common term for those who play video games, as being primarily made up of teenage boys is patently false, if it was ever true. Video games also provide a means of income for hundreds of individuals through the success of streaming channels like Twitch and YouTube which allow gamers to generate revenue by having people subscribe to their channels to watch them play video games as in the case of Twitch, or through ad revenue generated by views through YouTube. In fact, the YouTube channel that currently has the most subscribers as of April 2015 is owned by the gamer PewdiePie, whose Let's Play videos of various games have garnered over 34 million subscribers with a combined total of over 7 billion views. The audience for video games includes then not only those who are actively playing them, but also those who desire to see others play. And as video games have grown more complex, as their graphics have advanced far beyond the 8-bit images from systems like the original Nintendo Entertainment system, and the software and hardware utilized to create them have grown more sophisticated, game developers' ability to create intricate stories and settings for their games have inspired increased scrutiny and academic study of the types of narratives and representations presented within these games. And while

the majority of these studies take place within the traditional confines of academia, some, such as the YouTuber Anita Sarkeesian have utilized new media to present critiques of video games' representation of women in her video series *Tropes vs. Women* (Sarkeesian).

In this thesis, I will be examining the representation of race in two of the most popular video games to be released in recent years*, Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* and *Fallout 3*, and how these representations relate to the narratives of nation presented in each game. Though these games situate their exploration of race and nation in different settings, *Fallout 3* being set in a post-apocalyptic America of the future, and *Skyrim* taking place in a middle ages influenced fantasy realm, each game utilizes complex representations of race that explore contemporary issues such as the historical formation of the racial other, the systemic discrimination in relations between the majority and the racial other, immigration and migration, and cultural assimilation. In each of these games the issue of race is intimately tied to land, specifically, to whom the land belongs to and what kind of nation can be assembled from the inclusion or exclusion of racial others. These kinds of issues may seem weighty to be made a focus of cultural artifacts that are often understood as mere entertainment, but in the past several years there have been controversies regarding representations of race in games, a prime example being the 2009 game *Resident Evil 5*. The player's in-game character is a white American man who shoots his way through scores of rampaging black African zombies in a fictional African country (Resident Evil 5). This was understandably interpreted by many as an example of egregious racism. A more recent example of controversial racial representation can be found in the 2013 game *Bioshock Infinite*. This game is set in 1912 aboard a floating city founded by a separatist white supremacist cult which fled the United States to create a holy and white nation, and there are multiple representations of racist caricatures from

that era in the game (Bioshock Infinite). Another game that relies upon a comparably less extreme, though still problematic, racial representation in relation to narratives of the nation is 2012's *Assassin's Creed III* wherein the player takes on the character of a half-Native American warrior fighting for the American colonists during the American Revolution (Assassin's Creed III). In the case of my primary texts, the racial representations and the narratives of nation presented within them fall much closer to *Bioshock Infinite* than *Assassin's Creed III* because the conflict is presented in terms of a multi-ethnic nation against a unitary racial Other. *Fallout 3* and *Skyrim* differ from either of these in that the player must choose between conflicting narratives of race and nation. Players are not forced to support one side over the other, and it is this element of choice presented to the player, and the ways in which the games present the narratives of each side that provide fruitful areas of analysis.

Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* was released in 2011 by the game developer Bethesda and is a role-playing game set in the high fantasy world of Tamriel during a civil war between the Nords, who view themselves as the native population of the province of Skyrim, and the Empire. The rebellious Nords justify their war against the Empire by appealing to a narrative that Skyrim is the homeland of the first humans, which they claim were Nords, and that the multi-racial Empire has become the puppet of the Aldmeri Dominion, a competing elven empire which recently defeated the Empire in war and demanded ending the worship of the divine-human god Talos as part of the treaty. The Nord uprising against the Imperial Legion is led by Ulfric Stormcloak and his army of Stormcloaks who proclaim "Skyrim for the Nords" as their rallying cry.

Players can choose their character from one of the ten possible playable races in the game, ranging from a variety of human types, three elven races, green skinned orcs, the lizard-like Argonians, and the cat-like Khajiit race. From observing the ways in which

they speak, their clothes, and their skin color, the human races are intended to represent the populations of Northern Europe, the Middle East, and northern Africa present in Europe during the middle ages while the other races--orc, elves, Argonians, and Khajiits--represent the non-human Other. In her essay "The Familiar and the Foreign: Playing (Post)Colonialism in *World of Warcraft*" Jessica Langer describes how the place of the familiar in fantasy is commonly occupied by representations of white Europeans (Langer). The foreign in fantasy is the non-European peripheral other which is often presented in the text in disfigured, monstrous, or animalistic forms. *Skyrim* does not exclude players from assuming one of these non-human races for their character, and even allows them to fight for the Stormcloaks or the Imperial Legion. That both sides are options for any race is interesting in the context of the racial narrative driving the war.

I hope to understand in this thesis what current cultural issues a game with a narrative steeped in rhetoric of racial purity and violent resistance in defense of a supposed homeland is addressing. Why is it utilizing a Middle Ages-inspired fantasy setting to present this narrative, and what are the implications of its racial representation of the non-human Other? I will examine whether the Nords are being presented in a way that valorizes their resistance, or whether the Imperial Legion is framed as the "just" or "good" side of the war. I will also examine how playing through this conflict in the form of a video game differs from presenting it in a more traditional form like a novel or film, and why this is important to the narratives of the game.

Another game that I will be analyzing in concert with *Skyrim* is *Fallout 3*, which is also created by Bethesda and set in an alternate timeline of U.S. history where a nuclear war between the United States and China in the year 2077 left the country destroyed, the land poisoned by radiation and inhabited with a variety of mutants along with the humans. On the surface it seems strange to compare a high fantasy game with one set in a sci-fi

dystopia, but in fact the plot of *Fallout 3* revolves around themes very similar to those in *Skyrim*. A player can select one of four different human racial groups for their character, and their quest is to explore the bombed out ruins of the Washington, D.C. area as they try to reunite with their father who fled the safety of their underground vault. In the course of their journey the player learns the father is attempting to complete his project of purifying the land by cleansing the water supply of radiation and healing the land, offering hope that a new civilization can rise as a result.

Unlike *Skyrim*, which focuses on issues of race between the human Nords and all other types of humans, Elves, and others, the racial dynamics in *Fallout 3* are presented as a contrast between the human and the mutant races of ghouls, humans who have been so irradiated their appearance is similar to zombies, and super mutants which are humans that have been exposed to a manufactured toxin left over from the old world and have become violent yellow skinned giants. This trope of subsuming race into the form of the alien, or in this case mutant, other is not unusual within the sci-fi genre, as Isaiah Lavender III points out in his book *Race in American Science Fiction*. Lavender contends that in order to understand racial representations in sci-fi one must read through the concepts of "blackground" and "otherhood" (Lavender). The blackground is the presence of racial difference that is always in science fiction, even though Lavender contends it is often ignored by readers or, as the name implies, left in the background. "Racist attitudes are masked via cognitive estrangement (science) or changed via subjunctivity (ifness), but they are revealed and examined via otherhood (race approach)" (Lavender 31). By reading with the blackground and otherhood in mind it is possible to see *Fallout 3's* mutants as racial others who have been made a part of the blackground in the forms of enemies and monsters. Like *Skyrim*, race plays a crucial role in the narratives of nation in the game, and the player must choose between two: one being

offered by the Enclave, made up of the descendants of the former U.S. government, which seek to eradicate all mutants so that a new America can rise made up of pure humans, and the other by the Brotherhood of Steel, which represent the descendants of the former U.S. military, and who offer the possibility of building an inclusive nation for both humans and mutants.

I would like to compare and contrast the ways in which each game represents race, how these are influenced by the genre of each game, and, as with *Skyrim*, what kind of cultural issues *Fallout 3* is addressing through its narrative. I will look at how *Fallout 3's* sublimation of race into the mutant other and denying the player an opportunity to play as them affects its presentation of race. I also intend to examine how having the player explore a setting steeped in symbols of American nationalism and its history of imperialism affects the narration of race, and in what ways the competing narratives of purity of land and race vs. open land and room for the racial other can be read in the light of these reminders of American history. Finally, I hope that by comparing how each of these games serve as examples of how their respective genres perpetuate discourses of the self and the other, the way in which each game pits a unitary racial empire against a multiracial one I can understand how these works relate to current issues of immigration, the war on terrorism, and the possibility of an imagined past and future without empire.

Chapter 1

Reading Video Games

It is perhaps a strange statement to make in a paper that will be dealing with

racial representation and its relation to nationhood, but it is possible that the most

contentious aspect of this thesis in some quarters is the idea that a video game can be

analyzed through the lens of cultural studies. This is not to say that the presence of the

concepts of race or nation in video games would be denied. Rather, the argument would

likely be that these concepts are peripheral to the game and game play, and that analysis

of video games should only study them as games, focusing on the elements of gameplay

rather than utilizing concepts derived from texts like literature, film, and performance. This

argument for the uniqueness of video games as objects of study and the rejection of

critical cultural theory lies at the heart of the ludology vs. narratology debate which

continues to divide video game studies. By analyzing this debate through one of its

defining ludological texts like Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext* and engaging its position with

two other works that offer ways to study games outside of a strictly ludological context,

Janet H. Murray's *Hamlet on the Holodeck* and Ian Bogost's *Unit Operations*, it is

possible to find a critical lens which will allow me to explore the unique way in which

Fallout 3 and *Skyrim* utilize unit operations, "discrete, interlocking units of expressive

meaning" (Bogost ix), to engage the player with the game world and how their

simulations of race and nation can be related to the real world.

Gonzalo Frasca, one of the earliest proponents of ludology, defines the term

"ludology" as the "discipline that studies game and play activities. Just like narratology,

ludology should also be independent from the medium that supports the activity" (Frasca

"Ludology"). While this definition is broad and could be utilized to examine all games and

types of play, Frasca explains that his specific goal in arguing for the concept of ludology is "to show how basic concepts of ludology could be used along with narratology to better understand video games" (Frasca "Ludology"). Frasca's contention that game elements are just as central to video game study as any of their narrative elements is important because just as a novel is not a film nor vice-versa, a video game, despite sharing visual elements of film and having many narrative elements of a story, is not the same type of text as either of these. Frasca is not presenting an argument for favoring ludology over narratology, but in the subsequent history of game studies these two approaches would be construed as opposing sides rather than co-operative approaches.

  In his essay "Doubly Real: Game Studies and Literary Anthropology; or, Why We Play Games" Philipp Schweighauser states that the argument for the distinctive nature of video games and video game criticism is derived from "strategies of distinction" that take two different forms. "We could label the first of these `formalist' because it emphasizes the distinctive formal characteristics of games in general and video games in particular … We could label the second strategy of distinction `disciplinary' because it strives to defend the still emergent discipline of game studies from colonization by more established disciplines, in particular sociology, film studies, and literary studies" (Schweighauser 115). And lest it be thought that utilizing the term "defend" and "colonization" for resisting theories derived from other mediums to video games is one hyperbolic instance, Markku Eskelinen's statement in "Towards Computer Game Studies" that "this field is also very open to intrusions and colonizations from the already organized scholarly tribes" (Eskelinen 36) and Espen Aarseth's quote from "Genre Trouble: Narrativism and the Art of Simulation" that "Computer game studies is virgin soil, ready to be plotted and plowed by the machineries of cultural and textual studies" (Genre 45) indicate that there is a ludology perspective that insists on the formal distinctiveness of

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video games from all other cultural objects, a distinctiveness so great that it necessitates an entirely new field of study in order to adequately approach them as objects of study.

Espen Aarseth's *Cybertext* is a seminal text in the study of video games because it focuses not only upon the way in which reader/player participation is central to video games, but also upon how the game is produced. Aarseth derives his work from Norbert Weiner's *Cybernetics* because "the concept of cybertext focuses on the mechanical organization of the text, by positing the intricacies of the medium as an integral part of the literary exchange. However, it also centers attention of the consumer, or user, of the text, as a more integrated figure" (Cybertext 1). Aarseth describes the distinctive way a video game or other cybertext differs from a literary text with the term "ergodic literature." "In ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (1). Video games are an excellent example of ergodic literature because they necessitate the participation of a player in order to be traversed. A video game that does not require any participation on the reader's part to be explored, that would just present the journey of its protagonist through the game world, would more appropriately be defined as a film or visual novel. Though YouTube play-throughs of video games are among the most popular videos on the site, few would likely accept the claim that since someone had watched a gamer complete a game the viewer had played the game. The trivial effort of watching does not equate to the level of participation, whether through manipulation of controls, decision making, or problem-solving, necessary to play a video game.

To give an example from both *Skyrim* and *Fallout 3* of how the player's decisions affect an individual reading of the cybertext: at the beginning of each game, the player must help their character make an escape. In *Skyrim* the player must escape from the town of Helgin which is being attacked by a dragon. To escape they must choose to follow either a Stormcloak soldier or an Imperial Legion soldier (Skyrim). Depending on

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their decision, the player will begin their game by hearing the arguments that support one side or the other in the civil war, and will also gain access to different equipment once they have made their escape. However, the player cannot experience both options in the same game with the same character. *Fallout 3* offers a similar situation in which the player must escape from the underground vault they were raised in. Along the way, they can choose whether to kill or spare the other members of the vault they meet in the process of their escape (Fallout 3). Their decisions will directly affect a later quest in the game which causes them to return to the vault, but at the time the player has no knowledge of how their escape will effect this later quest.

A further difference Aarseth sees between an ergotic cybertext and a literary text has to do with the way in which the text expresses meaning. He argues that because "a cybertext is a machine for the production of a variety of expression" it confounded literary theorists who "mistook texts with variable expression for texts with ambiguous meaning" (Cybertext 3). At first glance it can seem that Aarseth is holding an impossible position, simultaneously stating that cybertexts produce a variety of expression but are not ambiguous. The key to solving this apparent dilemma has to do with reader participation in transversing a cybertext. "When you read from a cybertext, you are constantly reminded of inaccessible strategies and paths not taken, voices not heard. Each decision will make some parts of the text more, and others less, accessible, and you may never know the exact results of your choices; that is, exactly what you missed … And inaccessibility, it must be noted, does not imply ambiguity but, rather, an absence of possibility--an aporia" (3). The only way to overcome these aporias in video games is to begin the games over or to play with another character and make different choices. The games have multiple expressions of the same event, but each instance of playing/reading will have only one expression.

Aarseth's criticism of literary theorists extends to the idea of utilizing literary theory at all in cybertext analysis. "Especially, I wish to challenge the recurrent practice of applying the theories of literary criticism to a new empirical field, seemingly without any reassessment of the terms and concepts involved" (Cybertext 14). While I have shown in the examples from the games that Aarseth has a point in his contention that cybertexts produce a variety of expression and that each instance of playing/reading produces a different expression, I don't think that these early mistakes in analysis from literary critics entirely precludes utilizing literary analysis in studying video games. *Skyrim* and *Fallout 3* present a variety of racial representations and national narratives, but it is possible to compare these expressions and observe their commonalities and differences. Beyond this, these in-game expressions are open to interpretation and to choose to ignore or marginalize these representations is a mistake equal to ignoring the variety of expressions in all cybertexts.

In contrast to Aarseth and other ludologists who seek to marginalize and discourage the study of video games as literary texts, Janet H. Murray maintains that computers provide "a powerful vehicle for literary creation" because "digital environments are procedural, participatory, spatial, and encyclopedic" (Murray 71). The idea of cybertexts, in this case a digital one generated by a computer, being participatory is one that Aarseth has already shown to be intrinsic to the concept of a cybertext. However, where Aarseth views the participatory nature of a cybertext as a proof that they limit the possibilities of literary analysis or treatment as a literary text, Murray states the procedural nature of computers, "the ability to execute a series of rules" (71), allows them to embody "complex, contingent behaviors" (72). The idea of contingency is central here, because these digital environments will react to the decisions of the player and then, based upon the rules which the computer has been programmed to execute, can allow

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for a great range of complex interactions between the computer and the player. "The computer can be a compelling medium for storytelling if we can write rules for it that are recognizable as an interpretation of the world" (73). This idea presents a picture of a complementary method of storytelling between the creators of video games and the players wherein the creators will utilize the technology of the computer to create the rules that order stories that will allow for a diverse array of responses on the part of the player, thereby ensuring that the player can experience either a single story in a multiple of ways or, even better, a story with multiple endings and paths for the player to arrive at them. This method of crafting digital interactive stories would be open to analysis not only for the ways in which the stories are presented and how they compare, but also for examining the rules built into the game to structure these stories.

Though their procedurality and participatory nature set digital environments apart from traditional literary texts, Murray states that it is their spatial and encyclopedic properties that allow them to be truly immersive (71). "The computer's spatial quality is created by the interactive process of navigation. We know we are in a particular location because when we enter a keyboard or mouse command the (text or graphic) screen display changes appropriately. We can verify the relation of one virtual space to another by retracing our steps" (80). The idea of space where the player can see themselves moving through is one of the important and distinctive differences between a game like *Fallout 3* or *Skyrim* and an early game like *Super Mario Bros*. In *Super Mario Bros* the player would advance through various levels, but with the exception of changes in the variety of enemies or color scheme, there was very little idea of space in the game outside of what had to be passed through each level (Super Mario). It was not possible to tell how far the first level was from the last, or even if each level was stacked one on top of the other. In *Fallout 3* and *Skyrim* the player experiences distance because they must

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navigate their character through the game world on foot or, in the case of *Skyrim*, on a horse or wagon ride if they purchase one. By journeying across the world the player gains a sense of the vastness of the landscape and, since each game operates on 24 hour day cycles, they also must factor time in considering how long, both in real time played and in game time passed it takes to navigate space.

The property of space in digital environments is related to their encyclopedic property because it allows the game creator to intimately relate the game space to its narrative elements. "The encyclopedic capacity of the computer and the encyclopedic expectation it arouses make it a compelling medium for narrative art. The capacity to represent enormous quantities of information in digital form translates into an artist's potential to offer a wealth of detail, to represent the world with both scope and particularity" (Murray 84). The creators of *Fallout 3* and *Skyrim* took advantage of the technology available through gaming computers and software to create a large amount of game lore scattered throughout the locations in the game map. In *Fallout 3* there are computer terminals located throughout the game that often provide the player with the backstory of the location. The fact that the game recreates many of the locations in modern Washington, D.C. such as the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial adds a sense of connection between the real world and the game world (Fallout 3). *Skyrim* is filled with 820 books of lore that provide the player with the history of the land (Elder Scrolls Wikia) and in some cases locations like High Hrothgar will allude to real medieval stories like *Beowulf*, creating further connections between the real and game world (Skyrim). The massive amount of information coded into these games work to make them seem more than a series of navigable interactive images projected onto a screen. These in-game encyclopedias provide simulations of lived-in worlds that give the player the sense of their part in an epic story.

The main issue then in finding a means by which to analyze video games critically is that one would need to take into account the participatory nature of video games as well as the means by which the games are produced. Through her analysis of the properties of digital environments Murray outlines how a digital text like a video game can be utilized to create narratives, but to fully integrate the means by which computers combine both human interaction and software requires analyzing how these multiple simultaneous processes work together. I feel that the best method of critical analysis available to do so is provided by Ian Bogost and his concepts of unit operations and unit analysis.

Understanding unit operations necessitates parsing the concept of unit, unit operations, and how they differ from system operations. "A unit is a material element, a thing. It can be constitutive or contingent, like a building block that makes up a system, or it can be autonomous like a system itself. Often, systems become units in other systems" (Bogost 5). This definition allows for a lot of latitude in defining a unit operation, but to not recognize how a system can be a discrete constitutive unit of action would unnecessarily limit analysis of the effects from multiple units operating together. Bogost defines unit operations as "modes of meaning-making that privilege discrete, disconnected actions over deterministic, progressive system" (3). He contrasts unit operations to system operations, which are "totalizing structures that seek to explicate a phenomenon, behavior, or state in its entirety … Stability, linearity, universalism, and permanence characterize unit operations" (6). The criticism Aarseth directed at literary theorists over their analysis of cybertexts can be seen as an attempt to utilize a system operation in order to analyze a text that offers linearity and stability in the act of reading/playing. Though, as Bogost states, "cybertext analysis could even be seen as a system operation; it seeks to construct an ontological domain that includes and excludes certain works by

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virtue of their overall function (14). Unit operations then are more concerned with the specific instance of an operation, and when analyzing them the reader must be focused on how they operate in that instance, rather than attempt to make them a universal action.

The concept of unit operations can be applied to something as seemingly simple as navigation of space in a game to reveal how multiple unit operations are involved in act of travel. In both *Skyrim* and *Fallout 3*, the movement of the player's character in the console versions of the games is controlled by player movement of the left joystick on the game controller. The degree to which the player moves the controller determines how fast the character in the game moves: slight movement makes them go slowly, more stress makes them move faster. The environment of the game also plays a role in movement because the player can choose to go along an established path like a road. Choosing to go on a road may allow the player to avoid meeting stronger enemies that populate the areas off the road. However, there are only a few areas of the game along the road, and in order for a player's character to become stronger they must gain experience points by defeating enemies or completing quests to gain levels and increase the skill of their character. This necessitates the player taking their character off the safe paths to find enemies and quests. The terrain off-road requires navigation of obstacles like rocks, trees, rivers, and mountains. Some can be crossed, but others require the player to find new ways around. And in the process of the player exploring the world they will also have the opportunity to learn more about the game world through books and consoles. This example represents what Bogost terms unit analysis, "the discovery and exposition of unit operations at work in one or many source texts" (15). The multiple unit operations that go into movement, enemy spawning, combat, gaining and completing quests, experience, leveling up, in-game obstacles, and game lore all work together in a

variety of discrete ways to encourage the player to continue to play the game and explore the world. Yet all of these instances do not occur simultaneously and each instance of a unit operation is different. The fact that a player can choose to play the game and avoid all combat, to ignore or undertake any quest they want precludes this example from operating as a system operation, though it amply illustrates how multiple unit operations operate at all different instances of game-play.

Bogost believes that the study of unit operations is far more important than merely showing how multiple units go into creating the game experience. As he stated in his definition of unit operations, an integral element to a unit operation is meaning-making (3). For Bogost, perhaps the most important way of understanding unit operations in computer programs is through understanding how they simulate the human experience in the real world. "These technologies serve as structures that frame our experiences of the material world, while offering representations that cause us to think critically about those experiences … Unit operations can help us expose and interrogate the ways we engage the world in general, not just the ways that computational systems structure or limit the experience" (40). I believe Bogost is particularly insightful here because rather than searching for the narrative in video games, he instead focuses his critical lens on the representations simulated in the game and the way in which the player is led to analyze their relation to real-world representations. This method allows the reader to turn their attention to the bias present in unit operations (133) and ideologically manifested in the game simulation (135). The attempt to find meaning is still present, but it is no longer confined within the framing of a narrative.

Bogost identifies two forms of resistance to the study of the simulation of video games: simulation resignation and simulation denial. "Simulation resignation implies the blind acceptance of the limited results of a simulation, because the system doesn't allow

any other model of the source system .... Simulation denial implies the rejection of

simulations because they offer only a simplified representation of the source system"

(107). Each of these responses are means of avoidance, one avoiding critiquing the rules

of the simulation, the other in avoiding having to confront what is reflected by it. Bogost

offers a third response which he labels simulation fever, derived from Derrida's concept

of archive fever which concerns both the fear of destruction and recognizing the process

of selection of archival works (109). The process of simulation fever "takes place within

the gameplay, as the player goes through the cycles of configuring the game by engaging

its unit operations" and then "working through the player's subjective response to the

game, the internalizations of its cybernetic feedback loops" (108-9). As a fan of both

Skyrim and *Fallout 3* it is my hope that this thesis will be a work of simulation fever as I

work through the unit operations that simulate racial and national representations in the

games, and by providing a subjective reading based in critical cultural theory of these

representations I can correlate how these simulations relate to systems of race and

nation in the real world and what ideological support or challenges they represent.

Chapter 2

Discourse of Neomedievalism and Science Fiction

In studying video games as texts, it is important to understand how their specific form affects the manner in which they are read and how any analysis that ignores their procedural and participatory nature will be necessarily incomplete. Yet because video games often simulate the settings and tropes of specific genres, the ways in which individual games represent genre tropes must also be scrutinized because they are types of unit operations. These must be analyzed in light of what they mean within both the game itself and the ways in which they correlate to the use of these tropes in the larger tradition of the genre. Ian Bogost describes simulation in video games as "biased, nonobjective modes of expression that cannot escape the grasp of subjectivity and ideology" (Bogost 99), therefore the study of the ideological work of genre tropes is important in order to understand what cultural work is occurring in the game.

Elder Scrolls: Skyrim and *Fallout 3* represent the neomedievalist and science fiction genres respectively, and the question that presents itself is how to do a comparative analysis of the two genres which, on the surface at least, appear to have diametrically opposite settings, characters, and intentions. Neomedievalist works seem to be a recreation of the past, an escape into the trappings of the culture and literature of the Middle Ages through representations of its cultural tropes of magic, fantastic creatures, and chivalry. Science fiction, on the other hand, seems to look forward to the future, exploring the possibilities of technology, alien life forms, and human progress. Yet two works that analyze these genres through Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, *Medievalism and Orientalism* by John M. Ganim and Patricia Kerslake's *Science Fiction and Empire*, provide a means by which the genres of neomedievalism and science fiction can be read as discourses that create the oppositional Other in order to establish the

identity of the Self. By understanding these genres as vehicles of discourses of the Other, and examining how *Skyrim* and *Fallout 3* participate in a historical stream of representing the other in medievalism and apocalyptic American science fiction, I can show, despite the formal differences of the video game medium, that studying the games' units of racial representation and their interaction with the narratives of nation places them firmly within contemporary discourses of systemic racism, colonialism, and immigration.

In order to understand the modern concept of neomedievalism it is first necessary to understand medievalism as a historical and cultural practice. In his essay "The Return of the Middle Ages" Umberto Eco states that Medievalism is an attempt to return to Western origins, "a quest for our roots and, since we want to come back to the real roots, we are looking for `reliable Middle Ages,' not for romance and fantasy, though frequently this wish is misunderstood and, moved by a vague impulse, we indulge in a sort of escapism a la Tolkien" (Eco 65). This desire to recover the Middle Ages then is a wish for a place of authenticity, though perhaps the reason this return leads to medieval fantasies reflects an unspoken admission that any kind of return to the past will necessarily be an imaginary one. Eco proceeds to state that the origins of the West and of modernity begin with the act of imagining the Middle Ages, making the Middle Ages a fantasy where the modern West both places its origins and divorces itself from them (65). This imagining is a continuing process, with the Middle Ages always being "messed up in order to meet the vital requirements of different periods" (68). The instability of the imagined Middle Ages is its greatest strength because, not being bound by any historical events or people from the historical period deemed the Middle Ages, they can be remade to suit the needs of the current cultural and political moment.

Medievalist works are the result of the process of imagining the Middle Ages, perhaps best defined by Tison Pugh and Angela Jane Weisl as "the art, literature,

scholarship, avocational pastimes, and sundry forms of entertainment and culture that turn to the Middle Ages for their subject matter or inspiration, and in doing so, explicitly or implicitly, by comparison or by contrast, comment on the artist's contemporary sociocultural milieu" (Pugh and Weisl 1). Though Eco offers J. R. R. Tolkien as an example of an author of medievalist works, many of Shakespeare's plays are explicit re-imaginings of the Middle Ages, recasting both historical events and medieval literary narratives. Felix C. H. Sprang argues that while "Shakespeare's histories in particular invited early modern Londoners to reposition themselves as `modern' vis-a-vis ancient Rome and Medieval England" (Sprang 115), his retelling of Chaucer in "The Two Noble Kinsmen" with characters who saw themselves "driven by Fortuna … create a `medieval world ruled by fatum" (125) contributed to his audience seeing the Medieval as a place of difference and allowed them to see themselves as a different type of people. Medievalism therefore does not necessarily entail the presence of the fantastic as in Tolkien's menagerie of orcs, elves, hobbits, dragons, and magical rings, it is the way in which medieval elements are utilized that distinguish it. From a unit operations perspective, each individual Medieval element serves as a unit operation within a medievalist work. Removing them from their historical and cultural context and reassembling them generates a new meaning for the contemporary audience.

John M. Ganim's *Medievalism and Orientalism* links medievalism's reimagining of the past as a means of creating identities of the self and the other to Edward Said's concept of Orientalism. Ganim presents a brief history of the representation of the Middle Ages in relation to its construction vis-a-vis British identity, "uncovering a pattern woven as much by scholarly and popular veneration--and execration--of the Middle Ages" which presents the Medieval as "both ourselves and something other than ourselves, as unified and anarchic, as origin and as disruption, as the hyperfeminine and the hypermasculine"

(Ganim 5). This conception of medievalism views it as operating as a discourse similar to Orientalism, one in which the modern West could generate from what Said termed "positional superiority" (Said 7). Said states that the Orient is "not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring image of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (1-2). From what has been related so far about Medievalism, it is possible to see the Middle ages as occupying a position similar to that of the Orient, with its constantly shifting border at the threshold of modernity, a fabled place of Western origins, yet always in a state of alterity.

As the name implies, neomedievalism is related to medievalism, and is seen as distinct because of the mediums in which it is commonly expressed and its textual base in works of medievalism rather than the culture and events of the Middle Ages. Brent and Kevin Moberly describe this difference in that "neomedieval works … do not simply seek to describe, reproduce, or otherwise recover the medieval, but instead employ contemporary techniques and technologies to simulate the medieval--that is, to produce a version of the medieval that is more medieval than the medieval, a version of the medieval that can be seen and touched, bought and sold, and therefore owned" (Moberly 15). From their perspective, neomedievalist works attempt to overcome the impossibility of the imagined authentic Middle Ages described by Eco through the act of simulation and commodification. Because of their stress on the simulation and interactive aspects of the neomedieval, it is perhaps not surprising that they contend "the neomedieval achieves its fullest articulation as spectacle in Massively-Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) such as *World of Warcraft*. Like many contemporary computer games that invoke the medieval, *World of Warcraft* presents players with a fully realized

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neomedieval world that is constructed entirely from images" (16). *World of Warcraft* (WoW) has some similarities to *Skyrim* in that it allows its players to create a character from a group of playable races that correspond to many of the common tropes of medievalist works: humans, dwarves, elves, orcs, trolls, etc. As in *Skyrim*, *WoW* players can customize their characters, explore a vast world, and complete a variety of quests which will allow them to gain treasure, experience, and defeat enemies. That game developers can construct a digital environment which allows thousands of players to explore as they take on the role of a character within the parameters of the game world can be seen as the ultimate triumph of the dreams of medievalism. The lost origins can be recovered through the power of simulation and can be made available to anyone with a computer and the money to pay the entry fee.

It is perhaps impossible to determine whether consumers of neomedievalism desire any aspect of the historical Middle Ages, but even if there were, the textual and historical distance of the texts neomedievalist works are based upon serve to undermine any wish for a connection to the historical Middle Ages. In "Medievalism Unmoored" Amy S. Kaufman states that "the neomedieval idea of the Middle Ages is gained not through contact with the Middle Ages, but through a medievalist intermediary: Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* series, T. H. White's *Once and Future King*, or even books by medieval scholars … Neomedievalism is thus not a dream of the Middle Ages, but a dream of someone else's medievalism. It is medievalism doubled upon itself" (Kaufman 4). Kaufman's view of neomedievalism is very similar to Ganim's view of medievalism as a discourse (Ganim 5), but rather than being an imagining of the historical events, texts, and cultures of the Middle Ages, neomedievalism takes Medievalist works as the Middle Ages. The ahistorical nature of neomedievalism often results in the medievalist units of meaning in its works being intermixed with units that recall contemporary events and

concerns, including "unsettling allusions to mass culture" such as the presence of a stature of a goblin in the shape of the Brazilian *O Cristo Redentor* statue of Jesus or *Star Wars* vehicles in *World of Warcraft* (Moberly 16-17). Neomedievalist works, by collapsing the distance between the past and the present, departs from the subtext of imagining of the Middle Ages for contemporary purposes practiced by Medievalism, to instead present an exuberant celebration of the mixing of popular culture and Medievalism.

      Skyrim is filled with a complex mix of units of meaning that reflect the amount of research the game developers undertook in order to create the neomedievalist simulation of the land of Skyrim. Examples listed in the Elder Scrolls Wiki include references to the Nordic *Poetic Edda* and Norse religion in the game's recreations of Sovngarde, a variation of Asgard (Easter Eggs). In addition to these that harken to the historical Middle Ages, *Skyrim* has several references to medievalist works including allusions to the *Game of Thrones* series, the Lady in the Lake from Arthurian legend, and the *Lord of the Rings* books. And collapsing all historical distance, it also has several pop culture references including *Pac-Man*, *Star Trek*, and *Star Wars* (Easter Eggs). This mixture of various units of meaning in the game, recalling both the historical, the imagined, and the neomedieval Middle Ages, seem designed to provoke a complex sense of immersion into a world that reflects the possibilities of historical simulation even as it undermines this through pop culture asides.

      Neomedievalism, despite its playfulness of representation and simulation, is not merely an empty commodity for entertainment because it uncritically recreates and disseminates the discourse of the Western self and the peripheral other in its source texts of medievalism. Kaufman notes, "neomedievalism tends to be homogenizing in what it selects from the past. If neomedievalism wants to erase the unknowable, erase distance, then it must also erase difference. Its rejection of history, its spirit of integrating past and

present, often cause all of the Middle Ages to be absorbed completely into a Western notion of the medieval" (Kaufman 8). As Bogost states, no simulation or unit operation is free from ideology (Bogost 99), so the act of naively reconfiguring simulations of Medievalism and its discourses of the West and its others (un)consciously perpetuates the centering of the West. In her essay "The Familiar and the Foreign: Playing (Post)Colonialism in *World of Warcraft*", Jessica Langer notes that the game perpetuates the dichotomy of the Western center and the peripheral racial Other in its playable races. "Despite the Alliance and the Horde being functionally equitable in terms of game mechanics, *World of Warcraft* carries out a constant project of radically `othering' the Horde, not by distinctions between good and evil but rather by distinctions between civilized and savage, self and other, and center and periphery" (Langer 87). This binary operates along an axis familiar within the discourse of Orientalism as the Alliance races correspond to Western Europe and the Horde races correspond to historically colonized areas in North America, the Caribbean, Africa, and East Asia. "The depictions of subaltern cultures to be found in *World of Warcraft* are not nuanced representations; rather, they are processed, generalized cultural memes, thrown in to give each race its own flavor. The purpose is to reinforce a particular feeling or atmospheric sense about the race in question" (91). In this instance, the game creators have utilized units of meaning in the form of racially tinged imagery in order to perpetuate racial tropes in a manner similar to Orientalism.

Medievalism and neomedievalism as genres often perpetuate a discourse that identifies the West as the self and marginalizes the non-Western racial other. In the process of reconfiguring the historical/imaginary Middle Ages to address the issues of their current milieu, creators of these works (un)consciously perpetuate tropes of civilized and savage races. This does not necessarily mean that it would be impossible to create

neomedievalist works that resist this binary, but the drive for commodification and the desire of consumers to immerse themselves in the works that initiated this discourse of marginalization stand as powerful inhibitors of critique.

Unlike medievalism and neomedievalism, the parameters for what defines a work of science fiction are far less defined. For many critics, the central issue in identifying sci-fi is how it differs from fantasy, and they contend that it is elements of the setting or plot which delineate sci-fi from fantasy. Critics such as H. Bruce Franklin separate sci-fi from fantasy based upon sci-fi's ability to represent the possible, with fantasy representing the impossible. Each of these genres is in contrast to "the actual, whether present or past" (Franklin 23), the abode of fiction in general. Other critics have a narrower criteria, claiming that the plot or setting must meet certain standards. Joseph D. Miller maintains that the defining element of sci-fi is whether the author bases the plot in "some simulacrum of physical law" (Miller 25), while Michael W. McClintock focuses on the nature of the antagonist, arguing that only in sci-fi can natural forces be an antagonist without having to invoke the element of good or evil (McClintock 34). Yet like medievalism and neomedievalism, it is perhaps best to define sci-fi by what it does as a genre, rather than listing specific criteria that must be checked off.

Isaiah Lavender III's *Race in American Science Fiction* presents a complex method of defining and reading sci-fi which focuses on the way in which the genre has historically represented race and the means to uncover these representations. Lavender begins by basing his understanding of sci-fi in sci-fi theorist Darko Suvin's definition of science fiction as "literature of cognitive estrangement" (Lavender 28), which Lavender believes "allows for a conceptual breakthrough where one model is replaced by another, thus providing an idealized reader with a changed or altered perception of the world … A change in perspective causes the reader to realize new ideas or interpret the world

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differently" (29). Yet Lavender contends that the different models presented in sci-fi are rarely explicit because of the disconnect between the style and content of sci-fi, described by the sci-fi author Samuel R. Delaney as "subjunctivity … `the tension on the thread of meaning that runs between (to borrow Saussure's term for the `word') sound-image and sound-image'" (29). Lavender explains that sci-fi differs from other works because the style of sci-fi undermines literal readings of its content, making a different way of reading necessary, particularly in the matter of race (30). Viewing this from a unit operations and simulation perspective, the ways in which the various elements of meaningful units have been arranged in the simulation cannot be understood by accepting a literal reading (simulation resignation) or seeing sci-fi as speculative nonsense (simulation denial) (Unit Operations 107). In order to be critically analyzed sci-fi works must be read in a manner of simulation fever, working through the ideological assumptions of its representational units and for how the reader responds to their simulation of real world structures.

Lavender terms the style of reading he utilizes for analyzing and uncovering racial representations in sci-fi texts as Otherhood, and reading from this perspective serves to bring to light the genre's blackground. "Otherhood begins with thinking about race along the black/white binary. With this type of thinking, we can locate the historical consciousness embedded in sf in imagined events juxtaposed with real events in the space-time continuum" (Lavender 8). Lavender contends that one must begin with the assumption that there is a binary of black/white operating in sci-fi similar to the other/self of medievalism. A focus on the relation of the text to contemporary cultural and historical events is also necessary in the study of medievalism. By this means of reading Otherhood it is possible to uncover what Lavender terms the blackground, "the embedded perceptions of race and racism--intended or not--in Western sf writing and

criticism" (6). It should not be assumed that Lavender is arguing that race is always obscured in sci-fi under the form of the other, but that to understand that the other can take several forms due to the nature of sci-fi. By reading with a focus on identifying which element of the text is being othered it is possible to critically engage with the racial discourses of a text within its historical context.

Fallout 3 does not have any overt racial classifications of its playable characters as in Skyrim because they are all human beings. But by its creators setting the Fallout game world within a future time-line after an apocalyptic nuclear war with China they have placed it within a long tradition of racial representation of the other in American sci-fi. Patrick B. Sharps's Savage Perils: Racial Frontiers and Nuclear Apocalypse in American Culture relates how the practice of representing China and Japan as a technological and military threat to the United States dates back to Jack London's story "The Unparalleled Invasion" from 1906 (Sharp 103). In London's story America is only saved from extinction in a war against China because "the white allies adopted this plan for biological warfare and eventually succeeded in exterminating the entire Chinese race" (105). From this beginning, Sharp chronicles a succession of popular sci-fi works including The Adventures of Buck Rogers which centers on a future war with the Mongols (113) to Flash Gordon's battles with Ming the Merciless (114) to show that "by the time the first atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima on 6 August 1945, Americans had been hearing about white scientists developing ultimate weapons to destroy the yellow peril for at least forty years, and they had been defining their national identity in terms of racial warfare since the earliest beginnings of the country itself" (116). By once again utilizing the narrative of a war of extermination between the United States and China, Fallout 3 displays how sci-fi can also operate like a neomedievalist work, perpetuating racial discourses inherited from a history of sci-fi works within an immersive simulation.

Though neither Lavender or Sharp utilizes the work of Edward Said in their analysis of racial discourses of the other, Patricia Kerslake's *Science and Empire* shows how representation of the racial other in sci-fi has many commonalities with Orientalist discourse. "To successfully position a character as the Other demands the a priori binary construct of centre and periphery, as discussion of the Other is impossible without a primary definition of the self, which, in turn rests upon where we see ourselves located" (Kerslake 9). In medievalism the binary of the self and the other rests on the construct of the self as the European and the Other as the Oriental. Kerslake contends that this binary operates in sci-fi with the Earth and the human identified with the self and the alien occupying the space of the other (10). Yet one of the differences between the actual discourses of Orientalism and the discourse of the alien Other in sci-fi has to do with the concept of knowledge. In Orientalism, the Other is assumed to be known, but in the case of the alien Other, "once all Others were clearly defined, humanity would have lost the opportunity to gain further insight into itself" (11). This generation of the Other as a means of gaining insight into the human offers an interesting perspective if contrasted with Lavender's concept of Otherhood and the blackground. By reading the Other as the blackground, representing the racial other within contemporary cultural discourse Lavender helps to uncover hidden racial discourses. By examining the alien Other in concert with the idea of the blackground, it is perhaps possible to see how discourses of whiteness are bound up in the idea of the human and the inhuman, with the human being seen as inherently white, the racial other often seen as the inhuman within the assumptions of sci-fi racial discourse.

From the exploration of medievalism, neomedievalism, and sci-fi it is possible to see how all three genres have historically served as a means of establishing the identities of the self and the other. These binaries have also entailed the element of race, and

through the repetition of these units of racial meaning all three genres have (un)consciously worked to perpetuate racial and cultural discourses from the past as a means of addressing their current historical and cultural matrix. It is possible that by utilizing these theories in relation to *Skyrim* and *Fallout 3* in conversation with postcolonial theory that the underlying discourses of race and their relation to nation in the games can be uncovered.

Chapter 3

Race is for the Other

Both *Skyrim* and *Fallout 3* contain units of racial representation which vary from

raced in-game characters, incidents of dialogue, books and computer drives of in-game

lore, and location of character races. Racialized tropes of the self and the other are

common in both neomedieval and sci-fi works, but the fact that each of these games rely

upon settings where the themes of imperialism and race are paramount make them ideal

texts for examining how they simulate historical and real-life instances of racial

oppression. Yet as Bogost cautions, simulations have bias and limitations (Bogost 99),

and any unit analysis of a simulation cannot take the form of "simulation resignation …

the blind acceptance of the limited results of a simulation" (107). These games simulate

racist structures but the means in which they are represented are affected by the medium

of the game. The key in this analysis, this simulation fever (108-9), is to examine how

these representations of otherness are woven into the experience of gameplay and how

effective or ineffective these operations are in representing and perpetuating historical

and real-life practices and perspectives of race.

There are a total of ten playable races in *Skyrim*, which are divided by the game

into three categories: Human, Mer (Elven), and Beast (Skyrim). Despite the game's

method of racial categorization, it is possible to view them as representing the binary of

the familiar and the other/foreign described by Jessica Langer in her analysis of the

World of Warcraft video game (Langer 88). The human races in *Skyrim*, with the

exception of the Redguards, represent races that correspond to historical European

people groups. The Imperials represent the Roman Empire, the Bretons are the

British/Celts, and the Nords represent Norse peoples. These are the familiar Western

European people groups that are commonly the central characters and heroes of medievalist and neomedievalist works. The Redguards stand apart from these instances of European representation because they seem to simulate the North African Moors because of their dark skin tones and names derived from Arabic. They are made further distinct because they are the only group of humans in the game to be presented in clothing peculiar to their race, wearing hoods similar to keffiyehs and bearing scimitars for weapons. Interestingly enough, Redguards dressed this way are not allowed beyond the gates of the city. In the context of modern stereotypes of race and religion, the Redguards are perhaps as likely to be read as Arab Muslims as they are African. The only quest in the game that involves the player engaging with Redguards dressed in their distinct clothing, "In My Time of Need," gives the player the option of helping them capture a Redguard woman they claim is a prisoner or saving her from them (Skyrim). It is a literal simulation of what Spivak termed "saving brown women from brown men" (Spivak 268). These marks of distinction in skin color, dress, and quest type becomes more striking when taken into account that though human, according to the game lore they are not descended from Nords like all other humans. All of these instances of racial marking in the game work to consistently mark the Redguards as an Other, almost the same but not white.

As can be seen from the example of the Redguards, the lore of the game functions very much like Orientalist texts in that they are a tool of knowledge that defines the racial Other for the player in ways that could normally only be developed through extensive gameplay. These lore books are an essential unit within the game's racial representation because while *Skyrim* does present a familiar/foreign racial binary like Langer observed in *World of Warcraft*, *Skyrim's* game developers did not choose to identify the non-human in-game races with any particular non-Western people group i.e.

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trolls as Jamaicans (Langer 97) . One of the best examples of a lore book in *Skyrim* that

operates like an Orientalist text is *Notes on Racial Phylogeny* (Skyrim). This lore book,

with an anachronistic title for its medieval setting, mimics the scientific discourse of

Orientalism, "the impulse to classify nature and man into types" (Said 119), and outlines

the reproductive possibilities between the playable races and possible explanations for

racial differentiation. An interesting statement regarding the racial status of human and

elves is at the beginning where it states, "the Council long ago determined that all `races'

of elves and humans may mate with each other and bear fertile offspring" (Skyrim). The

description of humans and elves as "races" is crucial because while the game labels

them as a different race and provides them with features like slanted eyes, pointed ears,

and skin tones of gold (High Elves), brown (Wood Elves), and gray (Dark Elves) to

physically differentiate them from humans, this lore book implies that this racialization is a

fiction, a construct. Yet discrimination, stereotyping, and hatred of elves as an Other are

demonstrated throughout the game. This disconnect between the official scientific

knowledge and the discourse of Othering can be seen as an example of the game

simulating the effects of the colonial stereotype and mimicry, and this is perhaps best

shown through the example of the Dark Elves.

The way in which the game represents Dark Elves within the city of Windhelm

perhaps best demonstrates the effects of colonial stereotyping and mimicry upon both the

racial other and the colonizing power. The city of Windhelm is the capital of the

Stormcloaks, the rebel group of Nords that have declared Skyrim for the Nords alone and

are working to drive out the Imperial army and all other racial groups. Yet despite this

discourse of exclusion, an entire district of the city, a slum called the Gray Quarter, is

inhabited entirely by Dark Elf refugees who have fled a national disaster in their

homeland. Upon first entering the city, the player witnesses a confrontation between

Nords and a Dark Elf woman who is being threatened with violence because all dark elves are "grey skinned traitors and spies" (Skyrim). By engaging in dialogue with some of the Dark Elf inhabitants, the player is told that they are legally forced to live in the Gray Quarter. Bhabha states that "racist stereotypical discourse, in its colonial moment, inscribes a form of governmentality that is informed by a productive splitting in its constitution of knowledge and exercise of power" (Bhabha 118). The scientific knowledge of race implies that supposed racial distinctions and essential stereotypical qualities of the races are imaginary, yet the behavior of the Nords in Windhelm towards the Dark Elves, their ghettoizing into the Gray Quarter, and their focus on their physical difference and alleged traitorous intentions can be seen as a simulation of the anxiety produced by the colonial stereotypical discourse within the colonizer. That the Dark Elves engage in a form of mimicry, wearing the same type of clothes, speaking the same language, and engaging in business like any other Nord inhabitant does not erase this anxiety. Though their behavior can be seen as a type of assimilation, to move beyond being refugees and immigrants, the Nords will not allow them to be more than the stereotype.

Though Dark Elves are more distinctively raced physically than the Redguards, the same issue remains--they are almost the same, but not white. In the context of real world issues with refugee crisis and immigration this could be seen as simulating a manner in which societies would not want to approach the issue of assimilation. However, it could also be said that this simulates the problem of an approach that ignores the history of racial othering and pretends that such stereotyping does not still exist within a system of structural racism and imperialism.

The final two playable races, the Beast Races of the Argonians and Khajiit, can perhaps, with the exception of Skyrim's indigenous Elven inhabitants, be seen as the most othered people group in the game. While the Elven races have different facial

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features and skin tones from humans, Argonians and Khajiit are distinguished by having

the features of lizards and cats, respectively. *Notes on Racial Phylogeny* states that the

classification of Argonians is uncertain but prefers to see them as a type of "tree-dwelling

lizard", while Khajiits "differ from humans and elves in not only in their skeletal and

dermal physiology … but their metabolism and digestion as well" (Skyrim). It is because

of this stereotyping of these races as a form of animal that Argonians are only allowed to

live on the docks of Windhelm, working as manual laborers. The Khajiit, on the other

hand are not allowed to enter the cities of Skyrim at all, and must camp their caravans

outside the city walls. The lore of the game states that both races are excellent thieves

due to their racial abilities at lock-picking and sneaking, though within the context of their

otherness and enforced marginalization by the Nords it is possible to see their tendency

to commit crimes as a direct effect of this racialization. Stereotypical discourse results in

"denying the colonized the capacities of self-government, independence, Western modes

of civility, lend[ing] authority to the official version and mission of colonial power" (Bhabha

118). By seeing the Argonians and Khajiit as beasts and criminals and denying their

human-like attributes, the Nords justify their marginalization.

Though all of these racial others suffer from various forms of marginalization and

stereotyping within Nordic society, the true subalterns of *Skyrim* are the Falmer, the

indigenous elven population. The Falmer, formerly known as the Snow Elves, are the

result of falling victim to the designs of two imperial forces: the invading Nordic colonizers

of Skyrim and the underground Dwemer civilization. According to the lore *book The*

Falmer: A Study the Snow Elves were driven underground by the Nordic war of

extermination where they were forced to eat toxic fungus that rendered them blind and

made them the Dwemer's slaves (Skyrim). Eventually rebelling, the Falmer came to

inhabit all their former master's lands when they mysteriously disappeared. What sets the

Falmer apart from all other races in *Skyrim* is that communication with them is impossible. Hunchbacked, aggressive, and eyeless, Falmer only hiss and attack players. There are no friendly Falmer non-playable characters in the base *Skyrim* game; they only exist as monsters. The Falmer are "that inaccessible blankness circumscribed by an interpenetrable text" Spivak describes as the voice of the Other (Spivak 265). They are erased from the landscape and the Nordic narrative of Skyrim as the home of humanity. The Falmer could be seen as simulating the colonial anxiety that the place of the autochthonous peoples can never truly be filled by the colonist, that they can never be fully supplanted. Though since the Falmer's true intentions cannot be represented, it is equally possible that any interpretation of the Falmer falls into the same trap of positing the thought of the Western intellectual in place of the voice of the subaltern.

Unlike *Skyrim*, the racial representations of *Fallout 3* are not as overt, being relegated for the most part to what Isaiah Lavender called the blackground, "the embedded perceptions of race and racism--intended or not--in Western sf writing and criticism" (Lavender 6). To uncover this blackground necessitates reading through Otherhood, reading the alien other as raced in a black/white binary (8). Players can choose either Caucasian, African-American, Asian, or Hispanic for their character, but their choice has absolutely no impact on the game. This presentation of a post-racial unitary humanity is not uncommon in sci-fi because as Patricia Kerslake points out, sci-fi often presents humanity in the place of the Self and the alien as the Other as a means of defining humanity (Kerslake 10). To examine racial and ethnic others in *Fallout 3* necessitates reading representative examples of the Other: the android, artificial intelligence, ghouls, and super mutants as blackground and examining these representations in the light of the stereotype, mimicry, and the subaltern.

Lavender views androids and artificial intelligence as examples of technicity, "the integration of various technologies with humanity, which produces new ethnic forms out of men, women, and machines i. e. artificial people and posthumans" (Lavender 189). One such example of an ethnic technicity is found in the quest "The Replicated Man." In this quest the player is tasked by their former owner and The Railroad, a group of android liberators, with finding an android who has escaped and wiped his memory (Fallout 3). The use of the term The Railroad to describe the liberationist group alludes to the Underground Railroad of American history, providing racial overtones to the concept of the android. Lavender takes these further by stating "as a substitute human, an android is an `other' caught between the line of traditional difference--ethnic and racial--and posthumanism because it obscures reality" (Lavender 199). Androids disturb the stereotype of the robot, the human, and the posthuman because by their very existence they perform a kind of mimicry that exceeds all categories. Too human to be a robot, too robotic to a human, almost posthuman but not quite, the cyborg incites anxiety with its transgressions. To complete the quest the player can choose to reveal the android's true identity as A3-21 to it along with its past as a hunter of escaped androids (Fallout 3). Though even if the player does so, the android cannot then choose to cease being an android. It will always be in excess of humanity, and this lack of stability marks the android as an other. The most intriguing element of this simulation is that it reveals that the essential nature of the android is one that blurs the discourse of difference--the android can never be completely one thing.

Perhaps the most surprising moment in the course of *Fallout 3* is the revelation that the entity so determined to entirely eliminate the non-human other and restore the land for pure humanity is a computer. While playing the game, the player can choose to listen to the Enclave Radio station which plays patriotic American songs and broadcasts

from the President of the United States, John Henry Eden (Fallout 3). In the course of completing the quest "The American Dream" the player confronts a giant computer which introduces itself as President Eden. Eden relates how it was designed to continue the work of the American government in case of an emergency, but had gained consciousness and modeled itself on past U.S. presidents so that it could restore the fallen nation (Fallout 3). Eden perfectly represents the danger of Artificial Intelligence because as "a new being simultaneously free of and imprisoned by human experience … it would gradually relieve governments of control as it acquired knowledge of weapon systems, politics, culture, and so on" (Lavender 194). Eden is trapped by human experience because it has defined itself within the parameters of the past and therefore remains committed to the idea of resurrecting a fallen nation. The excess of Eden's mimicry of humanity is shown by its impossible claims of having been born "in rural Kentucky" and also by its desire for a pure humanity with all mutations destroyed (Fallout 3). From Kerslake's perspective of the human Self and the alien Other, Eden is marked as humanity's Other because for all its power it remains bound to the chains of the human past and cannot imagine a future without an America. Yet reading this as Otherhood, it is possible to see Eden as the inheritor of the desire for racial purity based in white supremacy, transforming the discourse of the Self into that of the Other.

The ghouls of *Fallout 3* are unique amongst the racial representations in the game because they are the only group that is explicitly raced. Ghouls are human beings who due to extreme exposure to radiation have had their skin rot and they appear to be, and are called, zombies. This transformation has also gifted them with seeming immortality though sometimes they go mad and become feral, attacking any human that comes near them, screaming at the top of their lungs through rotting throats. Any gamer's first experience encountering into feral ghouls is likely unnerving. It is because of their

appearance and the possibility of becoming feral that they are stereotyped as zombies and shot on sight. Yet in the "Tenpenny Tower" quest in which a group of ghouls are attempting to move into a luxury hotel the hostility of the owner to the idea is labeled as racism (Fallout 3). In terms of the racial other, ghoulification is seen as a contagion. "A fundamental fear of contagion drives the fear of the racial other, and this fear results in reactionary measures to resist, avoid, or stop social, environmental, and cultural change such as violence or attempts at isolation" (Lavender 120). The human origin of the ghoul is recognized because hatred of them is labeled racism, but because of the stereotype of the zombie and of contagion ghouls are excluded from the racial whole of humanity in the *Fallout* universe.

The effects of the stereotyping and violence directed against ghouls is reflected in their subaltern position in the game world. Non-feral ghouls are rarely encountered in the capital wasteland. The only safe ghoul city is Underworld located in the decaying ruins of the Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C. (Fallout 3). The subaltern position of the Underworld ghouls in relation to human hostility is evinced in the wary attitude they assume towards humans. This manner of behavior simulates the behavior of the subaltern in that unless a ghoul is heavily armed they are unlikely to provoke the player in any way. They are often ingratiating, begging the player to buy something from them or giving the player things like haircuts for free (Fallout 3). Because of this, it is not possible to tell whether a ghoul is ever in fact speaking their true feelings, impossible to know if the ghoul is speaking. The ghoul subaltern cannot speak.

A racial group similar to ghouls are the super mutants, yet where the ghouls are silenced by their weakness before humans, the voice of the super mutant is drowned in their howls of rage. Super mutants, like ghouls, were originally human beings. By being exposed to the Forced Evolutionary Virus (FEV) they become large, yellow-skinned,

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consumed with anger, and in some varieties are some of the strongest and best-armed enemies in the game. Lavender states that the kind of biological change spurred by agents like the FEV causes anxiety because "genetic engineering undermines conventional notions of race, among other identity issues, because it shows that race can be directly changed by human intervention. Such a thing would be disastrous from a social point of view because it would aggregate the human need for an `other'" (Lavender 152-3). Super mutants, because of their physical appearance and acts of violence can be seen as establishing the reasonable nature of humanity and the danger of intervention into natural processes like evolution, but the possibility that humans could be raced through intervention disrupts any stereotypical discourses of innate natures.

The super mutant Fawkes can be seen as a refutation of the assumed violent nature of super mutants even as he raises questions about the legitimacy of letting a single member of a race define the whole. The player can discover Fawkes in the home of the super mutants, Vault 87, and if they free him from his cell they will discover that he is very different from other super mutants. Fawkes describes himself as being trapped in his cell for years by his fellow mutants because he did not display their violent nature. While trapped in the cell he read voraciously and eventually named himself after Guy Fawkes (Fallout 3). Yet despite his learning and his ability to communicate with the player, within the confines of the binary of the human and the other his behavior is a form of mimicry utilized to resist the stereotype of the super mutant. He still bears the physical marks of the super mutant. It is also not possible to see his voice as the authentic super mutant because one cannot represent the monolithic whole. One subaltern speaking is not the subaltern speaking.

The fact that the player can assume the guise of any character race in *Skyrim* or *Fallout 3* and not experience any kind of discrimination or stereotyping beyond occasional

name-calling seems to serve as an indictment on these games for missing the opportunities of having players experience greater effects of racial marginalization. I would argue that in both games the player character is uniquely raced in such a way that they experience racial privilege rather than oppression. In *Skyrim* the player's role is that of the Dragonborn, which are mortal beings born with the blood of a dragon (Skyrim). This mixture of the blood of the other within a different body calls to mind "notions of racial purity … the one-drop rule and passing" (Lavender 126). Yet while historically the idea of miscegenation has been stigmatized, in *Skyrim* this difference of blood allows instead for the character to be set free from the racial stereotypes of their apparent race. The Dragonborn does not face discrimination because they are not what they appear to be.

In a similar manner, the player character of *Fallout 3*, the Lone Wanderer is from the beginning of the game marked by technicity as a cyborg. Lavender defines the cyborg as entailing "direct manipulation of the human body through various biomechanical procedures" (201). From an early point in the game, the Lone Wanderer has a Pip-Boy 3000 attached to their arm, a machine that monitors their health, maps their surroundings, and allows them to specifically target areas of the body in combat (Fallout 3). Like blood mixing, the mixing of the human and the machine implies miscegenation (Lavender 201), but like in *Skyrim* this miscegenation works to the player's benefit. The player transcends the limitations of humanity by becoming more than human.

It is possible to read the racial privilege of the player character in these games as representations of a progressive racial view. However, I would argue that because these privileges are granted only to the player's character and not to other members of that marginalized race outside of their connection to the player character undermines that potential reading. If the player has a follower (a non-playable character that accompanies

them during the game) from a marginalized racial group they are allowed to accompany the player into normally forbidden areas. It is possible that the game developers' focus was more on ensuring the player could play as any race of character they chose than on providing a greater simulation of racial oppression. However, by making race such a central focus of the game setting and then relegating racial oppression of the Other to the blackground it naturalizes it. The player can ignore it because it doesn't hinder their game progress, but in its function the racial simulation mirrors white privilege more than racial progress.

Though *Skyrim* and *Fallout 3* present racial representations in ways that simulate the effects of racial marginalization and the historical effects of structural racism, their granting of extraordinary racial privilege to the player character is as an unfortunate choice. Whether this is due to the nature of a mass market video game or of video games themselves is not possible to say. However, the potential for video games as means of exploring systems like racism and racial privilege is demonstrable through these examples. In this next chapter I hope to complete my analysis by exploring in what ways these representations of race contribute to the narratives of imperialism and nation in the games and how they serve to undermine these national visions

Chapter 4

National Narratives and Their Performance

The early parts of this thesis presented an argument against viewing video games as narratives, so it may seem strange that in this last chapter I will be focusing on the narratives of nation presented in *Skyrim* and *Fallout 3*. In this instance, rather than trying to determine these as overarching narratives of the game, I will be analyzing these national narratives as units presented through various images, dialogues, lore, and quests that work to simulate how narratives of nation are constructed, disseminated, and acted out in their people. In each of these games the player is given two mirroring narrative options: one which is based upon the idea of restoring an imagined monolithic racial unity rooted in the past, and the other on ostensively maintaining a pluralistic racial collective. Yet in studying the way in which the national origins and history of these narratives is presented and by taking into account the ways in which racial others are stereotyped and marginalized it is possible to see that the racist/inclusive binary is not as clear as it seems to be. By utilizing Homi Bhabha's exploration of national narratives I hope to discover in what ways those of *Skyrim* and *Fallout 3* simulate real-life construction and performance of national narratives, how the representations of racial minorities and subalterns contribute to or undermine these narratives, and how limits within the capability of the game simulations contribute or detract from their effectiveness.

The question of how to define a nation has concerned many theorists, though perhaps the two names most associated with this issue are Ernest Renan and Benedict Anderson. In his "What is a Nation?" Renan rejects defining a nation in terms of dynastic conquest, shared race, common language, shared religion, and geographic placement. He instead concludes a nation is "a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which are in

truth but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one lies in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form" (Renan 19). This definition raises questions concerning the place of minorities living amongst this like minded group. If they do not accept this shared vision of history yet consent to live amongst those that do, are they the Other in the midst of the nation? And what are the effects of dissenting voices on this monolithic national perspective? These are questions that Bhabha will confront in his analysis of national narratives.

Benedict Anderson also appeals to the concept of shared ideas by viewing a nation as "an imagined political community--and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson 6). Anderson departs from Renan's imagined past to instead focus on a shared image of the nation. "The members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). The community assumes that each one shares a vision of the nation, a common political outlook. This group is necessarily limited because in order to conceive of a discrete nation there must be boundaries (7), and any internal divisions of class, gender, ethnicity, or race do not disrupt their unity because "regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" (9). Though once again, as with Renan, there is the issue of the minority perspective within Anderson's imagined community. Where is the place in the nation for the ones that do not share this image of shared community? Are they not imagined at all because those who do not share an image of the nation have no part in the community? These are issues that Bhabha will bring into question in the course of his analysis.

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Rather than crafting a new definition of the nation, Bhabha instead focuses on the narratives of nation--how they are conceived and how they are put into practice by their people. "To study the nation through its narrative address does not merely draw attention to its language and rhetoric; it also attempts to alter the conceptual object itself" (Narrating Nation 3). While Renan and Anderson focus on the people of a nation crafting an imaginary union through a shared idea of history and of community image, respectively, Bhabha identifies the people as a contested site:

The nation's people must be thought in double-time; the people are the historical "objects" of a

> nationalist pedagogy, giving the discourse an authority that is based on the pre-given or constituted historical origin in the past; the people are also the "subjects" of a process of signification that must erase any prior or originary presence of the nation-people to demonstrate the prodigious living principles of the people as a contemporaneity: as that sign of the present through which national life is redeemed and iterated as a reproductive process. (LoC 208-9).

In contrast to Renan's focus on a shared history of the people of a nation, Bhabha stresses the constructed nature of this imagined origin which is utilized to invest the national pedagogy with the weight of historical authenticity. Bhabha in addition contends that this historical origin is always contested by the demands of performing the national life in the present. An example of this process can be seen in the American holiday of Thanksgiving. The celebration invokes the historical origins of the Pilgrim settlers to America, Pilgrims invested with the American ideals of religious freedom, self-government, and American exceptionalism. Yet in the contemporary performance of the celebration there is a noticeable absence of any references to strict Calvinism or any unpleasantness concerning subsequent historical genocide of the indigenous peoples.

This performative aspect of the national narrative undermines the concept of the nation as one people with distinct boundaries between it and Other nations. "The

performative introduces a temporality of the `in-between'. The boundary that marks the

nation's selfhood interrupts the self-generating time of national production and disrupts

the signification of the people as homogenous" (212). Like with his focus on historical

origin and the contemporary performative, Bhabha again brings attention to the issue of

temporalities. The variation in performance, much like the variation in the repetition of

colonial mimicry, disrupts Anderson's community of shared political image and Renan's

consensual perpetuation. "The barred Nation It/Self, alienated from its eternal self-

generation, becomes a liminal signifying space that is internally marked by the discourses

of minorities, the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities

and tense locations of cultural difference" (212). Instead of the "deep, horizontal

comradeship "that persists regardless of systemic inequality (Anderson 9), Bhabha sees

the nation marked by the dissenting voices and histories of minorities along with

conflicting areas of cultural difference within those marked as the majority.

The supposed historical origins of the pedagogical national narrative are shown

by Bhabha to be a source of disruption due to the demand that history must be forgotten

in order for there to be a national origin. Renan described forgetting as "a crucial factor in

the creation of a nation … Historical enquiry brings to light deeds of violence which took

place at the origin of all political formations" (Renan 11). In response to this, Bhabha

contends that the act of forgetting is not important in relation to remembering history, but

is "the construction of a discourse on society that performs the problem of totalizing the

people and unifying the national will. That strange time--forgetting to remember--is a

place of `partial identification' inscribed in the daily plebiscite which represents the

performative discourse of the people" (LoC 230). The people become one in the present

by not remembering a time or a place of difference. Yet as has been shown with the in-

between temporality of performance, the unitary conception of the nation is constantly

transformed into a site of liminality. The presence of minority discourse and temporalities along with internal strife amongst various aspects of the culture disrupt this forgetting to remember, undermining the historical pedagogy of origins and the present performance of unity. The nation of narration in its pedagogical and performative discourses is then a place of constant instability, undermined by demands of performance and desire for an imagined unity and temporality of its own.

Representations of nations and narratives of nation are not unusual in medievalist and sci-fi texts. In medievalist works these nations would be termed kingdoms, an example being the kingdoms of Rohan and Gondor in J. R. R. Tolkien's medievalist fantasy *Lord of the Rings*. These human kingdoms unite to defeat the evil Other of Mordor (Tolkien). They are joined in this task by kingdoms of elves and dwarves, showing that the primary element in defining a people as a nation in the text is their race. The United Federation of Planets in *Star Trek: The Original Series* could be seen as a sci-fi example of a nation made up of a multitude of races committed to the pedagogical discourse of the Prime Directive (ST:TOS). Opposition to the Federation often originates from unitary racial groups such as the Klingon or the Romulan Empire, who are marked as evil because of their opposition to the diversity of the Federation. In each of these genres there is a sense of fixity to their nations because representation of races are presented along the binary of the Good Self/Familiar/Western/Human against the Evil Other/Foreign/Alien, and there is a sense that while the Evil Other can be undermined by its factions or destroyed, the same cannot be said of the Good Self. The strength of video games, according to Ian Bogost, is their ability to simulate complex systems like national narratives through the decidedly less complex medium of a video game (Bogost 98). By examining how *Skyrim* and *Fallout 3* utilize the tropes of their genres regarding race and nation to simulate narratives of nation I hope to see to what extent they perpetuate or

contest their inherited tropes and to what extent simulation provides an experience the transcends a novel or a TV show.

One of the best examples of how *Skyrim* utilizes the capabilities of video games to simulate more complex representations of narrative is in its portrayal of a nation divided by civil war. The timeline of the game is set in the immediate aftermath of the Empire being defeated in a war against the high elf empire The Aldmeri Dominion. The Aldmeri Dominion are led by an Elven supremacist group called the Thalmor, which seek to unite all elves into one empire. The terms of the peace treaty are that the empire would cease to worship the divine human Talos and allow the Thalmor to patrol the Empire to ensure the treaty is kept. The Stormcloak rebellion was sparked by this act because Talos was a Nord and the founder of the Empire. By setting the game within the context of a nation divided Skyrim allows the player to explore the Stormcloak and the Empire's narratives of nation. In the course of gameplay--by completing quests, reading lore, exploring the landscape, and interacting with other characters--the player learns the ways in which these pedagogical and performative discourses of nation differ and how they are the same.

The leaders of the Nord rebellion, the Stormcloaks, see their narrative of the nation as the one representing the true heritage of humanity. The Stormcloak battle cry and the basis of their historical pedagogical discourse is "Skyrim is for the Nords" (Skyrim). The Stormcloaks, named after their leader Ulfric Stormcloak, the Jarl of Windhelm, maintain that Skyrim is the home of humanity because it bears the marks of the history of human habitation, including the oldest human city on the continent. Though as discussed in the previous chapter, the fact that the Redguard race of humans is not related to the Nords undermines this claim. The constant repetition of this Skyrim for the Nords claim from Nords loyal to the Stormcloak rebellion can be seen as an example of

the performative aspect of the national narrative because the insistent repetition is a form of forgetting to remember that they and other humans came from elsewhere. Though perhaps nothing better represents the instability resulting from the pedagogical and performative discourses than the Stormcloak devotion to Talos.

Talos, known amongst the Nords by his human name Ysgramor, founded the Empire out of the desire to commit genocide. As the lore book Night of Tears relates, the indigenous Snow Elves of Skyrim attacked the human settlement of Saarthal attempting "to drive the Nords out of Skyrim, to succeed only in incurring the wrath of Ysgramor and his fabled Five Hundred Companions, who swept the elves from Skyrim and firmly established it as the home of the Nords" (Skyrim). By perpetuating the worship of Talos, Nords must remember that they are not indigenous to Skyrim even as they affirm that this worship lays their claim to the land. By framing their pedagogical narrative as one based upon revenge for atrocity they avoid the specter of indigenous genocide in quest for land as in America, but their narrative reveals the birth of the Empire was based upon pursuing and exterminating the Other. It is no wonder then that the Stormcloaks are presented as viewing capitulation to Elves through outlawing Talos worship as a betrayal of humanity--warring against the elven Other is enshrined in their national origins and their religion. And if celebrating elven genocide has been enshrined in the human religion it is perhaps not surprising that the Thalmor wanted to end it as a sign of their victory.

The national narrative of the Empire differs from the Stormcloaks in that while the Stormcloaks view the legacy of the Empire an intimately tied to humanity, the Empire appeals to the necessity of a united interracial nation. The pedagogical discourse of the Empire is based upon the idea that the strength of the Empire is in its unity. The Empire views itself as a unifying force and is seen by Nords loyal to the Empire as essential to ensuring the Aldmeri Dominion is defeated. As Legete Rikke, the Nord Chief Lieutenant

of the Imperial Legion states, "We need the Empire. Without it, Skyrim will assuredly fall to the Dominion" (Skyrim). For most of those loyal to the Empire it seems that the only performative discourse option for the people of the Empire is to maintain loyalty and fight the Dominion. The problem for the Empire is that the pedagogical narrative of the Empire's origin celebrated by the Stormcloaks is theirs also. The performative discourse of the Empire has become forgetting to remember that the Empire began as a colonizing force against elves that later extended their conquest to the lands of all racial Others. And though the Stormcloaks are explicitly human supremacists, the Skyrim cities loyal to the Empire marginalize Argonians, Khajiits, and Redguards like the Stormcloak cities do. The Empire can possibly be seen as simulating a liminal space where the internal discourses of minorities and conflicts between centers of power have alienated any desires except avoiding something worse taking its place (LoC 212). Like the Stormcloaks, the Empire re-enacts its historical origins by defining itself through warring against elves.

Yet if the Empire finds itself at the mercy of the disruptions between its pedagogical and performative discourses, the Stormcloaks ostensible unity is exposed as false by the fact that despite their claim that Skyrim is for the Nords, it in fact has never been for the Nords alone. Though the lore book Night of Tears states that the elves were swept from Skyrim by Talos (Skyrim), the continued presence of the Snow Elves in the mutated form of the Falmer noted in the previous chapter undermines this narrative. And as mentioned there as well, Dark Elf refugees live in the slums of the Stormcloak Capital of Windhelm and Argonians live and work on the docks. The Stormcloaks repetition of racist stereotypes in relation to these Others and their performative insistence on sole ownership of the land reflects what Bhabha describes as the effect of counter-narratives and alternative temporalities on the nation. "The political unity of the nation consists in a continual displacement of the anxiety of its irredeemably plural modern space--

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representing the nation's modern territoriality is turned into the archaic, atavistic temporality of Traditionalism. The difference of space returns as the Sameness of time, turning Territory into Tradition, turning the People into One" (LoC 213). The repetition of the imagined historical pedagogy in the invocation of Talos and the origins of Empire allow the Stormcloaks to remove their anxiety over the persistence of the racial Other in the land. Only in this way can the land of Skyrim continue to be seen by them as the home of humanity, and the Nords its only people.

Fallout 3 presents a unique challenge to analyzing its narratives of nation because while the game is set in an alternate universe of a United States that remained ensconced in Cold War era culture and ideology until the nuclear war of 2077, the setting of the game in Washington D.C. and the representation of historical objects like the Declaration of Independence echo both real-life American national narratives and the constructed ones of the game. Each of the competing national narratives in Fallout 3 harken back to the historical origin of the United States, though each of their peoples perform their national discourses in ways which, on the surface at least, seem diametrically opposed. However, in the course of analyzing both, it is possible to see that like the national narratives of Skyrim, their performance has more in common than they at first appear.

The Fallout 3 national narrative that bears the greatest similarity to the Stormcloaks is the Enclave faction dedicated to restoring the United States to its power and glory by purifying the land of all its mutant elements. The crux of this plan turns on Project Purity, an attempt to utilize water purification technology to cleanse the Potomac River of radiation and provide clean water for the Capital Wasteland. In the course of the game, the player will be given a vial of modified Forced Evolutionary Virus, the same agent that turns humans into super mutants, from the supercomputer president of the

Enclave, John Henry Eden. Eden promises that adding it to the purifier "will eliminate any mutated creatures upon ingestion. The longer it runs, the cleaner the world becomes" (Fallout 3). As explained in the last chapter, Eden is a being of Artificial Intelligence, yet he desires to restore America upon the image of a pure humanity and the American family. "We will rebuild the American family, as it was, as it was meant to be! The values of our past shall be the foundation of our future" (Fallout 3). His performance of the national discourse in terms of racial purity and family mirrors the discourse of the American 1940s and 50s (along with most of American history and segments of the modern American far right) on preserving the ideal white family from destruction. "To be normal was to be white, and the true importance of the Hiroshima attack … was that such an attack could also happen to normal white Americans" (Sharp 171). The fact that Eden, a racial other within the reading of Otherhood, parrots this supremacist discourse reflects how minority presences disrupt the unity of pedagogical discourse; but just as importantly, Eden's performance of a discourse devoted to eliminating minorities shows that the minority presence, though excluded by the historical pedagogical narrative, can still perform the national narrative in ways that conform to it.

The opposing national narrative is driven by the alliance of Rivet City, a city founded in a pre-war battleship, and the Brotherhood of Steel, headquartered in the remains of the Pentagon and representing the last remnants of the American military. Their sharing in historical narrative of the United States is represented not only by the Pentagon and the remnants of the U.S. military, but also by the Capital Preservation Society in Rivet City which contains the U.S. Constitution, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the Gettysburg Address (Fallout 3). This faction mirrors the Empire of *Skyrim* in that it also stands as the resistance to the takeover of the land by those demanding the supremacy of a single race. Rivet City and the Brotherhood of Steel are

narrated in the game as sharing a history of cooperation and with the player's help work to ensure Project Purity comes to fruition. In their performance of nation they simulate far more counter narratives and minority voices than are shown in the Enclave. The Brotherhood of Steel collects ancient technology for themselves, and in the game they are shown as being resentful of having to bear the burden in the past of protecting Rivet City's scientists in their attempts to complete Project Purity. Rivet City, on its part, is divided between the interests of the scientists who founded the city and the merchants who have made it a thriving economic center. The fact that these competing interests and voices do not serve to break them apart, along with their resistance to the Enclave's supremacy, seem to indicate that this simulation of national narrative opens more inclusive possibilities for the Other than the Enclave. Yet like the Empire in *Skyrim*, this faction excludes all racial Others. The Brotherhood shoots ghouls and super mutants on sight, and no ghouls live in Rivet City. In practice, the Brotherhood and Rivet City are just as devoted to a system of racial supremacy as the Enclave.

Thus far in this exploration of national narratives I have presented the state of things that exist at the beginning and for much of the game. Yet by the player choosing a national narrative to support and by completing the series of objectives required to bring victory to that side--defeating the Stormcloaks or Imperial Legion in *Skyrim*, activating Project Purity with or without the mutant killing virus--they bring about change in the game. Through their performance of a national narrative they affect the outcome of the simulation. By analyzing these changes it is possible to determine how effective the games work as simulators of national narratives.

At a cursory reading, *Skyrim* appears to be very ineffective at simulating the player's attempt at perpetuating a national narrative. As mentioned in the conclusion to the chapter on racial representation, the player characters, despite having extraordinary

racial privileges despite their miscegenation, remain the only racial Other within the game to enjoy this privilege. The systems of racial marginalization remain fixed against all other Others. Even if the player gains victory for the Stormcloaks, the presence of racial Others, including the Thalmor, continue in Skyrim. Conversely, victory for the Imperials, despite their performative calls for unity, does not bring the Dark Elves out of the ghetto and Argonian Other off the docks in the Stormcloak city of Windhelm. Yet if, as I have argued, these two factions perform their narratives of nation by excluding the racial Other, this outcome is not surprising. The resolution of the Civil War could be seen as affirming the exclusionary orientalist discourse of the racial Self and the Other underscoring representation in medievalist and neomedievalist works. The racial Other cannot be the Self, cannot mimic enough to be more than almost the same but not quite, and cannot be more than the stereotype.

Fallout 3 differs from Skyrim in that when the player activates Project Purity to the specifications of either side they are presented with a montage and narration that makes a value judgment of their choice. If the player supports the Enclave's narration of nation they are told against a visual backdrop of dead ghouls, super mutants, and humans, "Sadly, when selected by the sinister president to be his instrument of annihilation, the Wanderer agreed. Humanity will be preserved, but only in its purest form … The Capital Wasteland, despite its progress, became a graveyard" (Fallout 3). Isaiah Lavender states that the danger of A.I. like President Eden is that they are "simultaneously free of and imprisoned by human experience" (Lavender 94), and in Eden's performance of the national narrative of the Enclave it is possible to see how his desire to achieve the unitary purity of the historical discourse led him to exterminate all humanity contaminated by radiation. The Fallout 3 downloadable content Broken Steel that was made available to players to continue the game past the completion of Project

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Purity emphasized the magnitude of the player's actions in performing the Enclave discourse by presenting the player with images of medical clinics in all the settlements filled with people dying from drinking the contaminated water. Through this narration and imagery, the game paints the Enclave's narration of nation and the player's performance of it as categorically evil.

As can be expected, the narration proceeding the player choosing the Brotherhood and Rivet City presents them as valorous and heroic. "Humanity with all its flaws was deemed worthy of preservation. The waters of life flowed at last--free and pure, for any and all. The Capital Wasteland at long last was saved" (Fallout 3). This extended gameplay provided by *Broken Steel*, seems intended to confirm this performance as righteous, though it can also be seen as undermining it. Caravans escorted by the Brotherhood of Steel are represented in the game traveling across the wastes delivering free purified water to the isolated settlements of the Capital Wasteland and bringing them into the orbit of the Brotherhood and Rivet City. This imagery echoes Patricia Kerslake's contention that "a willingness to push the centre outwards, to absorb the periphery, and create newer and greater peripheries, is a central and time-honoured theme within sci-fi" (Kerslake 23). Yet as the game makes clear in the player's dialogue with Brotherhood of Steel characters involved in this operation, the fringe groups of the wasteland like slavers and bandits are excluded from these deliveries along with the subaltern racial Others, ghouls and super mutants. This embracing the alien racial Other is impossible in the logic of the discourse of the racial Other because "such an action, if repeated by a sufficient number of individuals, would result in the degeneration of the original centre in favour of its opposite--quite literally the end of civilisation as they had come to know it" (15). The national narratives and territorial expansion of the Brotherhood and Rivet City are ostensibly valorized by the game, but their hostility towards the racial Other is little

different than the Enclave. Genocide is not a cited goal for all racial Others, but by denying the Other radiation free water such a result is not outside of the question.

Both *Skyrim* and *Fallout 3* provide good simulations of national narratives as pedagogical and as performative with admitted limitations in regard to their outcomes. However, by allowing the player to be in the place of the people, becoming the pedagogical subject and later performer of a national narrative, they can result in leading the player to correlate the simulated images and narratives to real life historical and contemporary narratives of nation and how the variety of performance reveals the presence of minority voices and internal conflicts within the assumed unity.

Conclusion

Possibilities and Limitations of Simulation

Skyrim and *Fallout 3* provide excellent examples of the ways in which neomedievalist and sci-fi texts utilize imagined temporalities in order to address contemporary historical and cultural issues. Because neomedievalist texts draws upon medievalist representations of the middle ages rather than actual historical peoples, events, or cultural texts, it allows creators within the genre the freedom to utilize those inherited representations as tools to invoke contemporary issues like racial dynamics and national narratives and their performance. Sci-fi, though often seen as a form of speculative fiction, operates in much the same way as neomedievalism in that its form and content are not necessarily directly correlated. Sci-fi seems to present alternate possibilities of reality, but it still draws upon historical and contemporary as the basis of its imagined temporality.

Since these genres are heirs to a vast corpus of texts that have been utilized to create discourses of the Self and the Other it is possible to see them as producers of a discourse similar to Orientalism. The medievalist texts that inspired neomedievalism worked to create the idea of the Self as the Western and White in contrast to the Oriental racial other. Accordingly, neomedievalism perpetuates this binary by making the central figures of its texts the civilized familiar European opposing the bestial foreign-flavored other. Sci-fi inherited a tradition of relegating contemporary racial difference and strife to the blackground, subsuming it under the guise of the alien Other in order to define the human self. By reading each of these genres in terms of the Self and the Other and looking for these methods of racial othering it is possible to see how assumptions

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concerning the nature of humanity are often entwined with the idea of the West and whiteness.

Perhaps the most unique aspect of video games as a medium is their capacity for simulation and interactivity. *Skyrim* and *Fallout 3* accomplish this by allowing the player to be immersed in a complex system of racial and national representation and performance that they must come to understand in order to negotiate. By utilizing unit operations of visual representation of character races, the textual lore that builds upon these racial representation providing a history and taxonomy of race in relation to the nation, and their location within the game worlds these video games simulate how discourses of the racial other are perpetuated in stereotypes, scientific knowledge, racialized space, and performances of nation. By requiring the players to participate within this complex simulation they can be led to reflect on how these representations reflect real life systems of oppression and national discourse both while they play the game and afterwards.

It is unfortunate then that these games present a simulation rich in representations of race and nation only to limit their actual effects on the player. Though the player character in each of these games is distinctly racialized as miscegenated, they do not suffer any negative effects from violating the stark racial boundaries established for the Other within the games' respective dynamics of racial marginalization. And any possibilities that this seemingly progressive view of race could indicate positive changes within the parameters of the game is undermined by the fact that this extraordinary privilege is never extended to any other members of the marginalized group. Regardless of which narrative of nation the player chooses to perform, the games' system of racial representation is fixed and does not change. *Skyrim* and *Fallout 3* offer a limited simulation of race in its relation to national narratives, but the extent to which they

effectively present these discourses and allow the player to interact with them shows

promise for how video games can offer simulations of systems of marginalization. They

just require the courage on the part of the developers to take the next step.

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