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One Does Not Simply Play a Game: Tapping into Game Worlds as Cultural Texts

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As a widely used, popular medium, digital games successfully circulate a variety of narratives, discourses, and practices among highly diverse audiences. While games are often riddled with references, players sometimes encounter narratives that draw on recent or more distant pasts, or that engender connections with contemporary issues and topics. This paper explores how digital games may be read, studied, and crafted as cultural texts. I argue that games have the potential to address and document topics and concerns that are contextual to and reflect discourses which are prominent in the public imaginary. I begin by clarifying what I mean when I speak of digital games as cultural texts. Then, I draw on Sanford, Hopper, and Burren's expanded definition of intertextuality, as they propose that game texts connect to a wide range of other types of texts, including lived experiences (Sanford, Hopper, and Burren 2016). I move on to quests, random encounters, and the combat system from the game *The Elder Scrolls Online* (ZOS 2014), for examining how referencing the real world illustrates the intertextual character of digital games, as well as their worth as cultural texts. My close reading of the game intersects with literature on digital games concerned with historical problem spaces (McCall 2022), ecocriticism (Remesal and Manuel 2019; Backe 2017), neoliberal subjectivities (Patterson 2014; Voorhees 2009), and procedural rhetoric (Bogost 2007). I conclude by revisiting Sanford, Hopper, and Burren's arguments for a complex learning system that draws on the intertextuality inherent in digital games, and I outline additional affordances specific to the medium that could be imagined in pedagogical spaces.

En tant que médium populaire largement utilisé, les jeux vidéo numériques diffusent avec succès une variété de récits, discours et pratiques auprès de publics très divers. Bien que les jeux soient souvent parsemés de références, les joueurs rencontrent parfois des récits qui s'appuient sur des passés récents ou lointains, ou qui établissent des liens avec des problématiques et des sujets contemporains. Cet article explore comment les jeux vidéo numériques peuvent être lus, étudiés et conçus comme des textes culturels. Je soutiens que les jeux ont le potentiel d'aborder et de documenter des sujets et des préoccupations contextuels qui reflètent des discours dominants dans l'imaginaire collectif. Je commence par clarifier ce que j'entends par jeux vidéo numériques comme textes culturels. Ensuite,

je m'appuie sur la définition élargie de l'intertextualité proposée par Sanford, Hopper et Burren, selon laquelle les textes vidéoludiques se connectent à une large gamme d'autres types de textes, y compris les expériences vécues (Sanford, Hopper, et Burren 2016). Je me penche ensuite sur les quêtes, les rencontres aléatoires et le système de combat du jeu *The Elder Scrolls Online* (ZOS 2014) pour examiner comment les références au monde réel illustrent le caractère intertextuel des jeux vidéo, ainsi que leur valeur en tant que textes culturels. Ma lecture attentive du jeu s'entrecroise avec des travaux sur les jeux vidéo portant sur les espaces problématiques historiques (McCall 2022), l'écocritique (Remesal et Manuel 2019 ; Backe 2017), les subjectivités néolibérales (Patterson 2014 ; Voorhees 2009) et la rhétorique procédurale (Bogost 2007). Je conclus en revisitant les arguments de Sanford, Hopper et Burren en faveur d'un système d'apprentissage complexe qui s'appuie sur l'intertextualité inhérente aux jeux vidéo, et je décris des potentialités supplémentaires spécifiques à ce médium qui pourraient être envisagées dans des contextes pédagogiques.

I first thought about media texts as cultural texts some eight years ago when I started watching almost religiously *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. I recognized dreams and aspirations that are present in our world, such as the normalization of inclusion and acceptance or the obsolescence of money. Arguably, any media text, from TV series, DIY vlogs, and podcasts to immersive art galleries, encodes traces of the present and documents shifts in discursive practices. Reading media texts as cultural texts opens up possibilities to identify, trace, and critically examine whether or how they encode aspirations, social changes, or realities, and whether those representations can tell us anything about how we make sense of the world.

For an early while, at the turn of this century, there has been much debate on how digital games should be studied. Janet Murray (Murray 1997) highlighted the interpretative possibilities that can emerge when engaging with even the most abstract of digital games, such as *Tetris*, while other scholars proposed that games are neither texts nor stories (Aarseth 2004; Juul 1999; Eskelinen 2001). Some consensus eventually emerged around the possibility that new frameworks should be developed for examining games on their own terms (Murray 2005; Frasca 2013; Aarseth 2003; Jenkins 2004). By now, the literature around the medium has flourished in numerous research directions. Games are studied in fields from education to urban planning, economic modelling, psychology, chemistry, biology, agriculture, and so on. In considering their complexity, digital games invite interdisciplinarity in research. Thus, a diverse range of frameworks can be applied and developed when using games as starting points to explore various research questions. One of the frameworks that informs my study of digital games is intertextuality. I am inspired by Sanford, Hopper, and Burren's research on the integration of digital games in pedagogical practice and draw on their extended definition of intertextuality (Sanford, Hopper, and Burren 2016). Sanford, Hopper, and Burren view digital games as inherently and deeply intertextual. They build on early work by Julia Kristeva (Kristeva [1966] 1986) and Roland Barthes (Barthes 1967) and propose that "video game texts are constellations of textual relations, continuously linking to a vast array of other texts" (Sanford, Hopper and Burren 2016, 110). Intertextuality in digital games is complex when referencing is embedded in the fabric of the game world. Once identified, examples of such referencing could be critically examined and opened up for conversation and debate in the classroom, as it often happens on various forums and platforms where players converge. Reading digital games as cultural texts, and examining them intertextually, could open up a diverse range of opportunities for discussions around representation, ethics, or meaning making.

Game worlds as reckonings with the past and its legacies

In considering their spatial vastness and expansive narrative universes, online multiplayer games could be an interesting site for examining connections to real world issues, or whether games act as cultural texts. One such game is *The Elder Scrolls Online* (*ESO*), developed by ZeniMax Online Studios and launched in 2014 (ZOS 2014). It is set in a vast fantasy world where players encounter and interact with a variety of creatures and populations. This vastness draws on previous single-player games published by Bethesda Studios as part of *The Elder Scrolls* series. With each title, the universe of Tamriel, and of various pocket dimensions where stories unfold, has expanded to include thousands of quests. In *ESO*, new chapters are added each year and explore various cultural contexts and political plots. The peoples who inhabit the game world are organized in races, a role-playing mechanic that is rooted in J. R. R. Tolkien's approach to categorization. At this time of writing, there are ten playable races in *ESO*, each with their own histories, politics, cultural practices, and systems of beliefs (UESPWiki 2024a). These histories, practices, and beliefs often overlap and interconnect in ways that may, at times, bear uncanny resemblance to those in the real world. The ever-expanding world of *ESO*, in terms of both spatiality and temporality, enables the configuration of seemingly unending dynamics between the peoples who inhabit it and opens up potential opportunities for reflection on how such dynamics mirror real-world past and present.

A "Harsh Lesson" about discrimination

Questing is an important aspect of players' experience, and many quests in *ESO* rely on exploring difference from various angles and in different contexts. There are three main types of quests in *ESO*: main quests, side quests, and daily quests. Main quests deal with specific story arcs about major threats that need to be averted. Side quests can usually be stumbled upon while exploring the world. While side quests may add further depth to the main story arc, they often provide insights into the cultural fabric and political dynamics of specific regions. One such insight is revealed in a side quest titled "Harsh Lesson," which has been part of the base game since *ESO* was launched in 2014. As players explore the game world, they run into conversations between non-player characters (NPCs), which act as narrative hooks. From the very start, the conversation that draws players to the "Harsh Lesson" quest introduces a sense of tension. When players approach the scene of the conversation, one of the NPCs hurries away, expressing fear of some kind of punishment (ZOS 2014, "Harsh Lesson"). Upon opening dialogue with Baham, the NPC that remains at the scene, the player finds out

that she is a student at the College of Aldmeri Propriety. At this college, students train to join the military or to run for a seat in the governing body of Aldmeri Dominion. In *ESO*, the Dominion is a political alliance between three of the game's playable races: the Wood Elves, the Khajiit, and the High Elves. The former two have joined the latter in an effort to overcome civil war and disease (UESPWiki 2023b). The player learns that due to their race, the students, who are either Wood Elves or Khajiit, are considered by their High Elf teachers as "lesser members" of the Dominion. Baham notes that the instructors "spout nonsense about civilized behaviour" and try to break students out of their customs and culture (ZOS 2014, "Harsh Lesson"). When students observe their cultural heritage, they are punished and made an example to their peers. Sometimes students are thrown in the Cave, a dark and isolated place that all students seem to fear. Eventually, Baham invites the player character to see their mistreatment for themselves. Upon the player's accepting the invitation, the quest begins.

The quest objectives guide the player through the college campus and involve speaking with the headmaster and with students. When players encounter the headmaster, he justifies instructors' behaviour as tough but fair. However, interactions with the students and the various scenes encountered while exploring the quest space confirm otherwise. The campus is scattered with scenes that are indicative of abuse at the college. The instructors threaten and utter statements, such as "Your kind disgusts me! And what is that smell?" "Are you crying? Good!" "Once you accept that your race is worthless, then we can use you" (ZOS 2014, "Harsh Lesson"). When visiting the college classrooms, the player enters scenes where students are asked to repeat oaths of fealty and of renouncing their beliefs. A student who had just been threatened with being thrown in the Cave believes that the corrective measures are "cruelty for the sake of cruelty" (ZOS 2014, "Harsh Lesson"). The player further observes the extent of the abuse by delivering healing supplies to students who "got it bad" that day and learns that some students' scars "don't show on the outside" (ZOS 2014, "Harsh Lesson").

In "Harsh Lesson," the player character is not clearly defined as a hero or a saviour. It is not the player character who delivers the solution to the problems faced by the students. While the player character does defeat the headmaster and helps a student escape the Cave, the students eventually surmount a rebellion and overthrow their teachers. Rather, from the outset, the quest emphasizes the acts of listening and witnessing. As soon as the player accepts the quest, Baham states: "Anyone willing to hear us out is blessed by the Green in my book" (ZOS 2014, "Harsh Lesson"). Moreover, if the player interacts with Baham between quest objectives, this statement is the only

line of dialogue available. Thus, it could be argued that, for the most part, the narrative and gameplay position the player as witness.

A quest such as "Harsh Lesson" could open up questions or discussions about ethics in representation, new forms of historicism, or the implications of bearing witness. In some ways, the quest "Harsh Lesson" may also be analogous to what Jeremiah McCall (McCall 2022) frames as a historical problem space. McCall argues that interpretations of the past are shaped by the medium that circulates them (McCall 2022, 22). Unlike other media, such as textbooks, documentaries, classroom lectures or historical monographs, games can embed choices for players that may significantly change the outcome of the game (McCall 2022, 25). A historical problem space is an opportunity to draw connections between the narrative or the mechanics of a game and the real-world past or present. When teaching or learning about history, representations of the past in digital games could act as starting points for critical examination and analysis (McCall 2022, 31). McCall uses historical problem spaces to teach historical thinking to students in secondary school. By investigating games in various ways and putting them in conversation with primary or secondary sources, students examine whether or how mechanics or situations from the game can make a defensible analogy to situations from the real world (McCall 2022, 30).

With its pronounced fantasy theme, *ESO* does not neatly fit the description of a historical game. However, "Harsh Lesson" may evoke allegorical connections with experiences and testimonies related to traumatic historic events, such as the residential schools or the Holocaust, and their legacies in the present. On their own, the characters and the setting of "Harsh Lesson" are clearly far removed from any representational likeness to reality. The students attending the College of Aldmeri Propriety were not forcefully removed from their families, and the design of the Cave itself can hardly evoke the darkest moments of our pasts or presents. On the other hand, the derogatory language used by the instructors or the assimilation methods practiced at the college may be too evocative to fit allegory. When I first played this quest, I was struck by how much it echoed some of my understandings of residential school experiences and their legacies in the present. After the quest concludes, the player can open dialogue with the student who escaped the cave and is reminded of the profound damage caused by persecution, including the impact on one's ability to dream: "One day perhaps Ilara's dreams will return. Return to normal" (ZOS 2014, "Harsh Lesson"). Thus, the quest may open up a space in which players are invited to reflect on the implications of systemic discrimination. The potential for reflexivity is afforded by examples that indirectly reference traumatic lived experiences from the past, as well as their lingering effects in the present.

Contested heritage in "A Thief to Catch a Thief"

Another example of how *ESO* alludes to colonial pasts is a side quest named "A Thief to Catch a Thief." This quest is part of the chapter *Necrom: Shadows over Morrowind*, which was released in June 2023. The plot revolves around an object of profound significance for two racial groups who observe starkly different beliefs and practices: the Baandari Khajiit and House Telvanni of the Dunmer. The Dunmer, also known as Dark Elves, are one of the playable races in the game, and in *EOS*'s narrative universe are politically organized in factions called Houses. The *Necrom* chapter is set in a land mostly inhabited by House Telvanni, who are described in the game's Lore Books as "classic ivory tower wizards" (UESPWiki 2024c). Unlike most peoples who inhabit Tamriel, the Telvanni still practice slavery, are portrayed as constantly hungry for power, and their guiding principles are inspired by their patron saint, Vorys the Immolant. The saint's main teaching is that ancestors should be honoured by practicing one's "forceful expression of will over others" (ZOS 2014, "A Thief to Catch a Thief").

The object in question is a gem that Vorys forcefully claimed centuries ago during a conquest expedition in the homelands of the Khajiit. After returning to his homeland, Vorys spent the rest of his days seeking to unlock the gem's "mystical properties" by exercising his forceful expression of will over it (ZOS 2014, "A Thief to Catch a Thief"). Set in a necklace and enshrined in a temple, the gem had become over time the Talisman of Saint Vorys and the most sacred relic for the Telvanni. Pilgrims travel to the temple to continue Vorys' work, and although they do not succeed in unravelling the gem's mysteries, their act of worship "serves as a humbling reminder that forceful expression of one's will is an unending journey" (ZOS 2014, "A Thief to Catch a Thief").

As the title of the quest suggests, the player is implicated in a heist of a sorts. A notorious thief called the Lark of Rosgard is announcing his intentions to steal the talisman, and the player is enlisted by Rilasi, a Dunmer knight, to help stop the attempted theft. The story also involves a caravan of Baandari Khajiit who have camped near the temple. Among the Khajiiti peoples, the Baandari are nomadic peddlers and merchants who live in caravans and travel across the land to sell their wares (ZOS 2014, "A Thief to Catch a Thief"). Just like how the Telvanni follow a code that draws on Saint Vorys' teachings, the Baandari cherish values and principles linked to Baan Dar (UESPWiki 2024d). There are several different stories that circulate about Baan Dar, and some of the peoples who inhabit *The Elder Scrolls* universe embrace this figure in different ways. To some, Baan Dar is the Bandit God, the Pariah, or the Man of a Thousand Faces, who inspires dreams of legendary robberies or explains crime as a legitimate means for either getting by or escaping oppression (UESPWiki 2020). At the same time, others see Baan Dar as a set of values and a code of conduct, which includes principles such

as helping others in need, repaying favours by passing them on, and staying true to oneself (UESPWiki 2024b). As reflected in the name of their clan, the Baandari openly embrace some of these values into a code of their own (UESPWiki 2024d). However, due to Baan Dar's reputation as a robber, the Baandari are often subject to scrutiny wherever they travel.

This quest adds to the existing game lore surrounding Baan Dar as the gem in question is linked to Baandari practices. While at the Baandari camp, the player character is pointed to a book that can be interacted with and read, on the spot or later. In it, the camp elder copied the story of an object called the "Eye of Baan Dar," so that it may be passed down to "his children's children" (UESPWiki 2023a). From it, the player learns that Vorys was actually tricked into coveting the gem by a young Khajiit, fondly named Little Ancestor, in order to save the lives of the people in her caravan during the saint's invasion of her homeland. In this story, Vorys cornered a Baandari caravan after days of pursuit and noticed how Little Ancestor was clutching a gem at her chest. After keeping silent during rounds of questioning about the gem's powers, Little Ancestor eventually responded that it "is powerless outside the hands of the Baandari" (UESPWiki 2023a). In thinking that the gem held great mystical powers, Vorys made off with it, leaving the Baandari to weep as he vowed to unlock its secrets with his forceful expression of will. However, the story goes on to say: "But he did not know that Little Ancestor had been given the gem only that day by her Clan Mother in exchange for a sweet song to lift everyone's spirits. He did not know that she had planned to give it to her cousin in exchange for his pretty mouth-harp that she had always coveted. And so the clan did weep, but only with laughter—for the Eye of Baan Dar was indeed a sacred thing, but truly worthless outside the hands of the Baandari" (UESPWiki, 2023a). Towards the end of the quest, the Baandari elder adds that if removed from the talisman, the gem is worth "very little coin," but it had been "rubbed smooth and small" from having been passed between Baandari hands (UESPWiki 2023e). One may trade the Eye of Baan Dar with any clan member and ask for anything in return within the receiver's means, whether it be supplies for the caravan or a song (UESPWiki 2023e). Finally, after a series of events packed with comic trickery and also with tragic betrayal, the player ends up with two barely distinguishable versions of the relic and has to decide which one to return to the temple: will they "honour the patron saint of House Telvanni by restoring their shrine's most beloved spoil of war," or "don the mask of the Pariah and deliver them the replica" (UESPWiki, 2023c)? Regardless of the player's decision, the quest reward is the same: "Armiger's Justice," a sword given by Rilasi, whereby Armiger stands for the knightly order she is appointed to.

One of the first real-world issues that stands out is how the story of the gem evokes cultural objects as evidence of colonial encounters displayed in museums. The gem encased in the Talisman of Saint Vorys is clearly defined in the quest as the "Dunmer's most beloved spoil of war" (UESPWiki 2023c). Removed from the "hands of the Baandari," it had been placed for centuries in display as a symbol of Dunmer triumph and military might (UESPWiki 2023a). When conversing with the priest at the temple, the player asks: "Saint Vorys stole the gem from the Khajiit in Elsweyr?" to which the priest responds: "Not stole—claimed in conquest" (UESPWiki 2024e), which seems to instantly legitimize Dunmer's right of ownership over the object. Such language has direct correspondence to practices of despoiling conquered spaces and territories that were not prohibited until the Hague Convention in 1899 (Grumhaus 2023). Moreover, the treaty signed at the Convention does not apply retroactively (Grumhaus 2023, 54). The right of state or museum ownership over previously acquired spoils of war, such as art and objects of cultural significance, is a continuous site of contestation, which is at times portrayed as a "'cultural war' [...] waged against museums" (Grumhaus 2023, 69). Drawing on the language used by the priest as he points to the role of the relic in Dunmer heritage, the quest could be read as a sort of postcolonial critique or commentary in relation to the appropriation of culturally significant items. The Eye of Baan Dar is indeed a treasured object, as it grants whoever holds it anything within means from anyone who follows the code of the Baandari. The framing of its perceived despoiling as Baandari trickery, or rather superior command of wit, undermines the very tenets of Telvanni or even Dunmer society, including its superiority over other races. Suggestive of this potential authorial intention is another book that the player can find in the Baandari camp, which explains the "inherent superiority of the Dunmer people" as "the direct descendent of the Aldmer, the First Folk" (UESPWiki 2024f). Furthermore, the real significance of the gem remains unknown to the priest and, by and large, to the Dunmer. Midway through the quest, the player character hands Rilasi the book with the story found at the Baandari camp. Rilasi acts surprised, as if she had never heard the story before. When asking Rilasi whether she will reveal the story to the priest, she responds: "You mean the third-hand account that directly challenges the religious importance of the most sacred relic in the shrine of this peninsula's most influential patron saint? I wasn't planning on it, no" (UESPWiki 2023d). It could be argued that House Telvanni's interpretation of the significance of the Baandari gem, whereby the gem is attributed great and mystical powers, is akin to the colonial gaze that fetishizes the everyday life of the other. At the same time, in light of the story recorded by the Bandaari elder about Little Ancestor, the Telvanni practices that rely on the teachings of Saint Vorys gain an air of caricature.

The dissonant interpretation of the gem's significance is further accentuated by the procedural rhetoric embedded in how the Telvanni treat the relic. Ian Bogost proposes that games may enable meaning-making, or rather possibility spaces, through their rule systems, or rather processes, which in turn lends the medium a particular persuasive potential (Bogost 2007, 42). While investigating the temple, the priest is heard several times "humbly" asking visitors to maintain an "out of arms reach," "respectful distance" from the relic (ZOS 2014, "A Thief to Catch a Thief"). One of the quest's tasks has the player character approaching the relic, which prompts the priest to yell, "Excuse me! Please step back from the relic!" (UESPWiki 2024e). Telvanni's attitude and treatment of the object are starkly different from the significance it has for the Baandari. Its exchange from one hand to another among the Baandari has made the gem smooth. Once the player becomes familiar with the story of the Eye of Baan Dar, this procedure embedded in the quest, whereby breaking the rules of the temple produces the priest's rebuke, has the potential to strengthen empathy towards the Baandari.

One final aspect that is present in the game world in various ways and is highlighted rather conspicuously by the quest is a sense of negotiated identities. In this case, this aspect draws attention to the prejudice experienced by minority groups. Most characters in the quest point one way or another to the stereotypes surrounding the Baandari. For example, Rilasi is concerned that, given their "unsavoury reputation for theft," the peddlers would unjustly take the blame should the relic be stolen by the Lark (UESPWiki 2023d). Rilasi also notes that the temple priest suspects the caravan of potential involvement in the impending heist (UESPWiki 2023d). The camp elder declares that the Baandari "are used to scrutiny," and a mercenary he has hired to protect the caravan argues that the Baandari "are used to being treated like criminals" (ZOS 2014, "A Thief to Catch a Thief"). Beyond the quest, the game complicates the understandings about the Baandari through various diegetic and procedural means, from questlines to Lore Books and in-game objects that can be collected. For example, Pirharri the Smuggler is an NPC whom the player can earn by completing the Thieves Guild questline. In the game's user interface, she is described as a Baandari peddler who can be summoned by the player to fence, for a cut, stolen items. Unless talked to, Pirharri always walks crouched, the sneak movement in the game. Designed as an allied NPC, this affordance strengthens the stereotypes linked to the Baandari as thieves.

On a different note, with the launch of *Necrom*, one can earn pieces of an armour set called Baan Dar's Blessings. Equipping five pieces from this set reduces Breakable Crowd Control effects received from NPCs or other players by 75%, in exchange for a 35% reduction of one's own Breakable Crowd Control effects on others. Crowd Control effects can hold the player in place or slow down their movement for a short duration,

and some effects are breakable: in exchange for a certain amount of stamina, the player can remove some of the negative effects from their character. For each additional piece of the set equipped that builds up to the fifth, the player character gains more health and armour. As such, the set is designed towards sturdier playstyles, whereby with the added health and armour values the player character can sustain more damage. Altogether, these mechanics embedded in the set allude to the already existing Baan Dar figure that breaks free from captivity, whether it be enslavement or imprisonment, marking themselves as the Pariah as they draw attacks away from allies and onto themselves. In fact, Baandari characters in both "Harsh Lesson" and "A Thief to Catch a Thief" employ the stereotypes attributed to their own group as a way to divert attention away from their primary goals. In "Harsh Lesson," a Baandari sells healing supplies to the students, who in turn think he is only trying to profit off their suffering. The quest eventually reveals that he is using this cover to investigate the teachers' connections to a supremacist group, and he loses his life for this cause. In "A Thief to Catch a Thief," the caravan elder is indeed working with the Lark, who is no stranger to the Baandari. Inspired by the story of Little Ancestor, and by the help he received from the caravan when seeking refuge, the Lark had offered to return the Eye of Baan Dar to the Baandari. Given the thieving and criminal nuances associated with the Baandari, the caravan was strategically stationed near the temple "to misdirect investigation" away from the Lark (UESPWiki 2023c). Such narrative and procedural strategies blur the lines between criminality and justice, while they are also reminiscent of profiling experienced by racialized persons.

Game worlds as reckonings with the present

Another example from *ESO* alludes to a different type of reckoning and speaks more of how the game encodes artifacts that echo contemporary discursive practices. In 2022, *ESO*'s developers introduced the druids as a new culture in the game's extensive narrative universe. Players learn about druidic society through quests, by reading books, by speaking with various non-player characters, by collecting various objects, or through world events called "random encounters." By engaging with these game elements, players find out that druids observe customs and practices based on different interpretations of a creed called "The True Way." Different interpretations of the True Way have led to a schism in this society, dividing druids into three circles. Two of the druidic circles, Eldertide and Stonelore, reflect dynamics that correspond to current competing discourses in the real world regarding our responses to the climate emergency. While exploring, players can encounter a scene where a brother and a sister debate the interpretation of the True Way. The sister is part of the Eldertide circle

where druids dismiss and become aggressive towards any intrusion into the natural world. While her discourse is not new, it is young and radical, whereby there are no compromises when it comes to safeguarding the natural world: "Do you expect me to dance and sing while those blasted nobles use our forests for sport? When peasants tear down all the animals' homes to make useless fences for their farms? Something has to be done, or we'll lose everything of worth that's here" (ZOS 2014, "Legacy of the Bretons"). The brother's perspective is as moderate as it can get. His Stonelore circle is like an open society, where druids strive to teach by example about living in harmony with nature: "it's a simple matter. Nature is home to all. But many merchants and city dwellers don't see that as truth. My sister feels slighted by the nobles of Gonfalon Bay. But I know the value of patience. All things change with time" (ZOS 2014, "Legacy of the Bretons"). While the brother believes that change comes with time, the sister and her circle demand immediate change. The perspectives outlined by these two characters resemble the competing views between environmental activists and other structures of power in the real world. Jens Marquardt (Marquardt 2020) identifies tensions between youth activism, such as the student-led Fridays for Future movement and the hegemonic responses to the climate emergency. Marquardt (Marquardt 2020, 4) argues that these tensions manifest as a space from where new political imaginaries emerge and whereby contested visions of the future influence each other's discourses. The dynamics between the druids may invite reflexivity or enable relatability among various players. At the same time, this random encounter situates *ESO*, or rather the game's 2022 chapter, "The Legacy of the Bretons," in more obvious ways within our present negotiations with climate futures.

ESO overall is not explicitly engaging the player in an ecocritical discourse. The goal of the game is to immerse players in a world where one may come to believe that anything is possible and, in doing so, to maintain a constant player base. However, examples such as the narratives surrounding the druids may add to approaches in commercially successful games in addressing environmental concerns through an ecocritical lens. Navarro Remesal and Víctor Manuel (Remesal and Manuel 2019) are among the scholars who propose possible concepts that could help to situate games within an ecocritical frame. This framework may help to identify games that "invite us to think about nature, to better explore our relationship with it, and to be critical of the problems of our time" (Remesal and Manuel 2019, 25). Drawing on Ian Bogost (Bogost 2007), Remesal and Manuel (Remesal and Manuel 2019) point to the game's procedural rhetoric, that is, how the world of the game is represented and the possibilities it affords or prohibits discursively through its rules. Then, Remesal and Manuel propose that the ethics and moral consideration embedded in the representation of animals,

such as whether they are treated with care or as obstacles, can serve as another lens through which players could be engaged ecocritically. Finally, the authors ask whether a rhetoric of degrowth could be possible, whereby the game would "require systems and discourses that did not reward infinite accumulation, that pointed out the damage of excessive consumption in the whole virtual world, reward moderation, showed imbalances between regions, and/or recognized the waste produced by the action of the player" (Remesal and Manuel 2019, 17).

Noting that the corpus of explicitly ecocritical games is limited, Hans-Joachim Backe (Backe 2017) also proposes six criteria that may help to investigate the extent to which existing popular games may engage the player to think critically about their relationship with the environment and inspire ethical ecological thinking. Backe (Backe 2017) draws on Miguel Sicart (Sicart 2011), who proposes that proceduralism is deterministic and may afford too much authorial intent to the game, which in turn limits the possibilities of play. Instead, players may be engaged in ecological thinking in ludic spaces defined by rules that are ethical values in themselves (Sicart 2011). Backe's criteria include whether the player engages with the environment both semiotically and ludically; whether the modes of engagement produce coherence or friction (or, differently put, whether they produce dissonances); the centrality or peripheral positioning of ecological topics; whether nature is treated in specific or informed ways; whether the mechanics are anthropocentric or other perspectives are available; and finally the tone employed in approaching ecological topics, whether it be "affirmative, critical, or ironical" (Backe 2017, 48).

Through these lenses, *ESO* offers some limited possibilities to engage with the game world in an ecocritical sense. The simulation of the natural environment is mostly geared towards exploration and adventuring. The distribution of natural resources that can be used for crafting speaks more to the engagement with the game's world and its economy rather than actively inviting reflection on the consequences of the player's interaction with the natural world. At times, hostile animals appear to be positioned in ways that discourage confrontation or, at the very least, allow players to avoid it if they wanted to. For example, treasure chests are sometimes placed in the proximity of a bear's den. The player can choose to defeat the bear to get to the treasure faster or wait a few seconds until the bear moves away to a safe distance. Thus, if for whichever reason, the player does not want to enter combat with hostile animals, the option to wait for them to move away is often available. It is also not uncommon for a bear cub to be placed close by, which may suggest some design intention to engage the player in a more observant relationship with the natural environment. Similarly, there are at least two instances where caches of crafting resources are placed in safe distance from wildlife

scenes. Players can collect all the resources scattered across the cache areas without entering the triggering range of nearby hostile animals. In these scenes, creatures from the local fauna engage in various interactions, from playful to confrontational. Although they are rather scarce, such scenes seem to be placed with authorial intent. It could be possible that in these contexts level designers may have intended for players to engage with the game's fauna in ways other than mostly combat.

While they are not the focus of the chapter, the quests involving the druids and their practices seep into the main story of the "High Isle" chapter, with a nature spirit occupying a prominent role. Similarly, daily repeatable quests in the High Isle game zone include missions where the player is hired to care for the natural world. Albeit, it may be unlikely that players engage with daily quests with the same attention each time they repeat them. Nevertheless, if the player pursues them consistently, such missions may gradually instill quest-specific messages that point to ideas about protecting the natural world. While for the most part, the game mechanics are anthropomorphic, some quests transform the player into other creatures for a short while, such as a monkey or a mouse. Players can also acquire the Lycanthropy skill line, which affords transformation into a werewolf for a brief period. These mechanics alter some of the ways in which transformed player characters interact with the world, such as player movement or the way objects are grabbed or carried. However, the brevity of these transformations may offer little if any effect in an ecocritical sense. Finally, particularly in the "High Isle" chapter, the overall tone in relation to ecological topics is often affirmative and points towards a more responsible relationship with the environment. The tone used by characters such as the druid sister from the random encounter, and the position of her Eldertide Circle, are critical. This critical tone is maintained performatively though the presence of the Eldertides as hostile agents in the High Isle zone. This hostility is justified diegetically primarily as an expression of Eldertides' discontent with the urban encroachment of the natural world. Overall, it could be argued that there are some elements of ecocriticism present in the game that may draw attention to environmental issues. However, rather than actively encouraging ecological thinking, these examples may more likely point to the game's quality as cultural text, as it records and indexes prominent discursive practices in contemporary society.

Procedurality as cultural text

While in "Harsh Lesson" the player is positioned in a role that emphasizes the act of listening, in "A Thief to Catch a Thief" they are to decide the fate of a culturally significant object. Moreover, in the latter, regardless of the player's decision, the quest reward is fashioned as a sword of justice, affording a sense of making things right at

the conclusion of the story. It could be argued that in this quest, the player acts as what Christopher Patterson (Patterson 2014) calls an "umpire." Patterson argues that games such as *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age* (BioWare) position the player as a sort of cultural manager in relation to their team, whereby the negotiation of cultural difference is fashioned in terms of labour roles (Patterson 2014, 9). However, the *ESO* player resolves ages-old grievances rather than managing cultural differences, as Patterson observes in the *Mass Effect* series. Like most digital games that enjoy commercial success, particularly within the RPG genre, *ESO* casts the player into a world that is vastly rich in multicultural dynamics. In quests that navigate cultural or political tensions, the player is often referred to by quest givers as an outsider who is best suited to cast a decisive vote based on their untainted experience with the communities or political tension at hand. In such cases, just like Shepard in *Mass Effect*, the player character "exists outside of history" (Patterson 2014, 15). Such positioning renders violent historical and economic processes as things that need to be transcended instead of addressed. Much critical work in the 2010s draws attention to discursive practices in RPGs that may reflect, reproduce, and reify neoliberal values, practices, and regimes of knowledge. As Gerald Voorhees puts it, the multiculturalism represented in *Mass Effect* is a neoliberal one, whereby it "embraces the other to the extent that the other has a calculated worth that 'brings something to the table'" (Voorhees 2012, 263). Voorhees (Voorhees 2009) also proposes that procedural changes in *Final Fantasy* across three identified moments in the series' history may reflect shifts in neoliberal discourse in the real world. While initially the game promoted heterogeneity in the configuration of team members for achieving class complementarity in combat situations, in later iterations, such as *Final Fantasy XII*, the series "abandons the principle of classes altogether" (Voorhees 2009). Moreover, while the worldmaking dynamic still relies on race, ethnicities, and nationality, these are constructed "only as obstacles to be overcome" (Voorhees 2009). Finally, one of the foremost concerns expressed by game scholars in this body of critique is the tendency in RPGs to conflate culture with race, which for example in *Mass Effect* speaks to "both biological and ideological difference" (Voorhees 2012, 266); in *Final Fantasy XII* produces a "transcendental subject, positioned beyond and above identity" (Voorhees, 2009); and in *World of Warcraft* is reminiscent of "the archaic and destructive paradigm of biological race" (Douglas, 2012, 285). Such a critique casts a cautionary light on the games' potential as persuasive media to perpetuate discursive practices fashioned as neoliberal utopian visions of worlds that erase race, class, and nationalities as identity markers, while they carry imperial undertones (Patterson, 2014).

Similar to most fantasy online RPGs, *ESO* employs a race and class system inspired by the Tolkien tradition. As the discussions above suggest, this system deploys

essentializing elements to the construction of player characters. These elements range from distinct physical traits to specific affinities or innate traits that are framed as passive abilities and are rooted in the dynamics of the game world. Passive bonuses reflect some elements of culture or environments associated with each race. For example, with their "woodland affinity," the Wood Elves, or Bosmer, benefit from increased speed, reduced fall damage, and enhanced resistance to disease and poison (UESPWiki 2024a). Khajiit, on the other hand, are afforded increased chances to successfully pickpocket, and their bonuses reflect their "natural versatility and guile" (UESPWiki 2024a). Comparably, the Nords are described as naturally "strong and hardy" and benefit from increased duration of drink buffs and resistance to cold (UESPWiki 2024a). Some of the traits for each race have more of a flavour value, as they are not specifically beneficial in combat, such as decreased fall damage for the Bosmer and the Khajiit advantage in pickpocketing. As such, they may be indicative of the nature-culture conflation seen in other RPGs.

If character progression and combat affordances in *ESO* could be read through the lens of procedural rhetoric, it could be argued that the game's creative direction has been employing diversity as one of its main headlines. At this time, there are 10 races and seven classes that players can mix and match, with the potential to create up to 20 characters on a server. Like in most online multiplayer RPGs, the combat system in *ESO* is exceedingly complex. However, so far, the game has placed a strong emphasis on class identity. Performatively, each class can be interpreted as manifestations of specific kinds of magic. For example, sorcerers command lightning and magic from a different dimension, nightblades employ shadow magic, and templars use solar magic. Players are afforded three sets of class skills. Each set of class skills caters to one of the three roles needed to complete group activities: damage dealer, healer, and tank. All class skills that enable an immediate action can be eventually morphed into one of two options for obtaining a differently nuanced variation of the skill's original version. Morphs can be changed at any time by making in-game currency donations to specific divine figures. Players are encouraged to experiment to the furthest extent with personalizing their gameplay, and each class could theoretically successfully perform in any of the three dungeon roles. In addition to class skills, there are currently numerous additional metrics that can be added to personalize gameplay. Players can purchase active and passive perks from a Champion Menu by using experience points converted into Champion Points as currency. They can also activate one of 13 available boons, with each boon offering a specific advantage. Hundreds of armour and weapons sets can be collected, and, at this time of writing, 80 sets can be crafted. Players mix and match sets and set pieces to combine traits and bonuses in different ways. Furthermore,

players can craft various consumable items, such as foods, drinks, potions, and poisons to temporarily increase, restore, or impair the resources needed for casting desired spells. With the exception of consumables, the developers modify the combat system at least every three months. These changes may involve increasing or decreasing the metrics on particular class skills and race bonuses, or modifying the advantages or limitations embedded in armour sets. This approach in game development produces several outcomes. On the one hand, it maintains the player base engaged. By modifying preferred or previously advantageous affordances, developers introduce new challenges and experiences. On the other hand, no race or class remains indefinitely more advantageous in relation to the others. Finally, some players chase METAs, or "most efficient tactics available," whereby they experiment with, or theorycraft, various configurations to identify or even lay claim to the best "builds" in the game.

The examples above give only a brief glimpse into *ESO*'s combat system and into the dynamics that emerge from the constant changing of the system's procedures. Arguably, although the combat system is an integral part of the play experience, not all players are interested in theorycrafting, or chasing METAs. Since its launch, *ESO* has grown to include new game modes, such as the housing system or the collectible card game "Tales of Tribute." These systems do not involve or explicitly require the use of combat abilities. Similarly, *ESO* may attract players for its approach to the player-run economy or for the storytelling it adds to the existing *Elder Scrolls* narrative universe. However, the examples pertaining to the combat system illustrate some of the ways through which approaches to game design may reflect shifts in discursive practices, including those concerning the neoliberal project. The constant iterative process of finding solutions to problems, such as new boss mechanics or periodic changes to the combat system, may reify a type of calculative and strategic rationality concerned with optimization and efficiency. If the combat system in *ESO* could be read as a cultural text, it could be argued that it reflects a world in which fast social, political, and economic changes demand adaptability, creativity, innovation, and openness to change, not very different from current spaces increasingly occupied by generative systems and environmental emergencies.

Conclusion

While the examples I have proposed tackle different subject matters, they all explore past legacies and their traces in the present, and invite reflection on issues that are still relevant in the real world. The possibility of interpretation draws on the inherently intertextual character of digital games. Sanford and colleagues (Sanford et al. 2017, 111) propose a complex learning system built around games that would foster a literacy of

intertextuality. They point out that players already develop a sophisticated intertextual literacy by repeatedly drawing connections between different games, genres, popular media, and other texts (Sanford Hopper, and Burren 2016, 120), including their own experiences (Sanford, Hopper, and Burren 2016, 123–124). These connections extend into other spaces, such as blogs, social networks, or game forums. Indeed, James Paul Gee (Gee 2012) notes that the in-game experience is only half of the story. More often than not, players theorycraft, debate game mechanics and meanings, and document narratives, items, references, and strategies outside the game space.

In addition to other media, digital games may contribute new forms of reflexivity, which are enabled by a host of affordances unique to the medium. First, as Janet Murray pointed out more than 25 years ago, digital games can be set apart from other media by the increased sense of agency experienced by players (Murray 1997, 123). However, as Murray notes, agency is not afforded by interactivity alone. Rather, agency emerges through the availability of choices players can make when engaging with the game world (Murray 1997, 125). Indeed, game designers prescribe a series of outcomes to the possible choices players can make. However, observing the changes in the world that derive from choosing one course of action over another may invite reflection upon the decisions one has made. Another attribute that may contribute a new kind of reflexivity is situated understanding, which speaks to the experiential character of the medium. In digital games, like in the real world, players learn by doing, and "experience," as Shaffer and colleagues (Shaffer et al. 2005) put it, "the concrete realities that words and symbols describe" (Shaffer et al. 2005, 106). A player understands and navigates the world of a game on its own terms and in its own language and solves problems and challenges with the tools available within the game world. While the understanding of a game world and its dynamics is contextual, sometimes this understanding may connect to issues from the real world. As the examples discussed in this paper show, *ESO*'s game rules, narratives, or the creative direction of some quests can engender reflexivity on questions surrounding discrimination, justice, responses to climate emergencies, or protecting the vulnerable.

With the audience for digital games increasing considerably each year, this medium may eventually bring important contributions to the classroom, as it already does, whether it be in grade school (McCall 2022), high school (Sanford, Hopper, and Burren 2016), or in higher education. Commercial titles could be explored as potential additions to the curriculum, as they may enhance comprehension by introducing a degree of experientiality when dealing with theory or abstract subjects. Indeed, one does not simply play a game. Rather, one may also often engage with narratives that are reminiscent of lived experiences that can hold immediate or historic implications.

This paper proposed several ways through which one can identify traces of the past, as well as the present, encoded in the narratives and rules of a game by drawing on the online multiplayer RPG *The Elder Scrolls Online* (ZOS 2014). One of the remaining tasks is to find suitable and accessible examples that could be used in the classroom or could serve as potential models from which games can be created for learning.

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