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Digital Elves as a Racial Other in Video Games: Acknowledgment and Avoidance

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AQ 1

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Abstract

Elves are a long-standing cultural trope in the West, where they have often represented the other and fears associated with otherness. Elves continue to do the same cultural work today and are a fixture of fantasy settings. Fantasy-based video games portray elves in a variety of ways across a few types of elves (high elves, half-elves, and dark elves), but there are consistencies to their portrayal across such spaces. Given the dearth of work on elves in modern narratives, the cultural work of elves as the other in video games is analyzed here. *World of Warcraft* (WoW), *EverQuest II*, *The Elder Scrolls* series, and the *Dragon Age* series were studied, with Tolkien and *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) as background. Although WoW is somewhat exceptional in its portrayal of elves, digital elves are mostly portrayed similarly to a historically idealized real-world Western minority.

Keywords

elves, race, other, games, MMO

Although the concept of elves goes back well over a millennium into pre-Christian Western cultures, elves are still with us today, predominantly in fantasy games. We have used elves in a narrative manner constantly since their creation to represent

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both hopes and fears through their embodiment as near-humans. As such, elves often represent a cultural “other,” even through different versions such as half-elves and dark elves.

Although elves are found across a range of narrative spaces, their presence in the academic literature is lacking. This study seeks to give elves the much-needed analysis they deserve as a cultural trope, via a study of four game settings: *The Elder Scrolls* (TES) series (III and IV) from Bethesda, the *Dragon Age* (DA) series from Bioware, and the two MMOs *EverQuest II* (EQ II) from Sony, and *WoW* from Blizzard. Relevant background for the elf types used in these games includes the fiction of J. R. R. Tolkien and *Dungeons & Dragons*, as well as older myths such as *Snorra Edda*.

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There are three separate types of elf I will focus on in this work, all of which do cultural work as “the other”: elves, half-elves, and dark elves. Elves in fantasy settings are usually presented as almost human but more in tune with nature. Half-elves, as part human and part elf, are often viewed as not “pure” by both elves and humans. As such, half-elves parallel mixed race people and discourses about mixed races in the real world. Dark elves, given their dark skin, are “Black” elves: as Bioware game designer Manveer Heir said, “The dark elves . . . They were the black people of the fantasy world” (Sheffield, 2011, p. 1).

In the American context, the most common explorations of “otherness” focus on Black/White race relations. People who are half-Black and half-White are usually considered Black or, more recently, mixed race. This is not so for the fictional half-elves, as the narratives around them usually stress how neither humans nor elves fully accept them. Beyond that, the majority of the characters in Western fantasy settings are “White” in terms of appearance. For fantasy games, a character’s skin color does not have the same cultural backstory as skin color in the real world: although racism exists in some games, Africa, Europe, Asia, and the Americas do not. There is one “Black” race typically found across some game settings, the dark elves. Given that narratives of elves in game are tied to the other, and the typical “Black” characters are a type of elf, the role of the elf as an “other” is multidimensional and worth exploration.

By studying the role of the elf in today’s cultural texts, we can continue to trace the developmental arc of this version of the other. Computer games are an important source of narrative in today’s culture for those who can access them (Kücklich, 2003). Games, game spaces, and their narratives have been analyzed with different methods and frameworks, and in order to fully understand them as cultural texts, their use of the other, via the portrayal of elves, must be explored.

The Term Race in Fantasy

In fantasy game settings, the group of physical embodiments (human, elf, dwarf, etc.) from which players can choose for their character is referred to as a *race*, not a *species*, despite physical differences across some character types. *Race* is used to

describe differences in appearance, culture, and geographical origin for characters. This use is consistent with how race is used in the real world, although in fantasy it is used more broadly.

Entman and Rojecki (2001) discussed how *race* is used in the real world for in-group and out-group identification, and “race classifies according to physical traits, primarily skin shade” (p. 241). In fantasy, people also use physical traits to define races, and definitional trouble arises with mixed parentage. Yet, Entman and Rojecki pointed out how “racial distinctions are heavily cultural if not arbitrary” (p. 242). Which physical trait is relevant, be it skin shade or pointy ears, is culturally dependent, and fantasy is its own culture with its own definition. Real-world physical traits have a genetic component, but in fantasy the range of traits for different “races” can be so great that they would be different species—such as with the differences between gnomes (like very small humans) and ogres (very large and monstrous).

If a species can be used by players for their character, then that species is given standing as a race. The in-game use of *race* is consistent for, and easily understood by, gamers. Generally, players do not define races: races come prelabeled and identified in the game itself, as the types of race you can play in the game are a part of the game’s mechanics.

The confusion stemming from the conflation of the terms *race* and *species* can be found across many sources (e.g., Elf (*Dungeons & Dragons* [D&D]), n.d.; Melchor, 2002). As Langer (2008) wrote about WoW, “while race in the game is biologically determined, race in the real world is socially determined, which creates a significant rift in perspective” (p. 88).

The origin for this conflation is not clear, but may stem from two sources. One is related to D&D’s tabletop practices: a character’s description, equipment and statistics are written down on a piece of paper, called the character sheet. The character sheet is similar to the demographics found on a survey or census form, where the word race is used. The other is that Tolkien described his elves and humans as the same race, they were “different aspects of the Humane” (Carpenter, 2000, p. 236, #181), and if we understand humans, elves, gnomes, and ogres, when they are playable characters and have human-like thoughts, feelings, and action, as humane entities, then it is easier to see how the fantasy use of *race* can apply.

Elves as Other

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Hall (2009) is the main source for the history of the word *elf* in early Western culture, with his detailed linguistic history of the concept. Hall’s work serves both as a foundation for and a parallel to our present day digital elves. As Hall has written, the way we currently see and categorize things in the world, such as elves, is different from the way we believe medieval peoples did. The medieval world was. . .

A pre-Linnaean world: we implicitly think of elves now as basically being a different species from homo sapiens, but medieval people don’t seem to have seen it like that;

elves are more like an ethnic other. Elves are distinct from normal people because of their supernatural powers, distinct from supernaturally powerful normal people (like the neighbourhood witch) because of their separate ethnicity, and distinct from most other supernatural beings (trolls, giants, what have you) in being otherwise more or less like people. (A. Hall, personal communication, April 26, 2011)

This ancient view is more in line with how Tolkien viewed his elves than it is today's portrayals.

Like Tolkien's work, many Western fantasy settings today lack non-White humans, and so lack a human other. Others can be used to engage various cultural tensions, and this role is often taken up by elves. In some of the game spaces here, elves are or have been enslaved, had their culture destroyed, been confined to ghettos, and half-elves represent mixed-race peoples.

Tangherlini (1995) pointed out how the connection between elves and the other in modern societies is not merely hypothetical nor relegated to fantasy games. In his work on Danish stories about an "other," he found that "Nineteenth-century legends assigned the role of the 'Other' to supernatural beings. Contemporary legend tradition . . . shows a tendency to assign the role of the 'Other' to Greenlanders, Pakistanis, Turks, Palestinians, Iranians and other ethnic minorities and immigrants." Historically, with the spread of scientific knowledge and the decline in the belief of actual elves,

The need for actants to assume the newly vacated legend functions appeared. With the marked change in Danish demographics, primarily the influx of large numbers of Asians and southern Europeans in the 1960s and 1970s, the immigrant and minority populations were the logical culturally relevant replacement. Like the *bjorgfolk* [elves, trolls, etc.], immigrants lead a life hidden from the native population. They have a separate culture and language. . . . Often, physical characteristics set them apart from ethnic Danes. Finally, the separation of these people from Danish society is intensified by the isolation of large minority populations in communities such as Ishøj [a town in Denmark]. The result is a group easily identified as Other, which lives and works outside the bounds of the ethnic Dane's sphere, in much the same way that trolls and elves lived and worked outside of the human sphere. (Tangherlini, 1995)

All of this leads to the question explored here: How are elves presented in games and related texts, and how do they relate to otherness?

Theoretical Setting

Many scholarly investigations of race and the other in video games have focused on the representation of real-world races in games (e.g., Chan, 2005; Langer, 2008; Leonard, 2003, Nakamura 2001, 2009a) and the difficulty of navigating real-world race through online forms (Nakamura, 2008). Although often a prominent minority in American games, African Americans are not the only minorities in

games, and researchers have studied portrayals of Hispanics and Asians (Leonard, 2006), and Arabs and Muslims (Sisler, 2008). Others have studied how players address and acknowledge race and avatars in virtual worlds (Kafai, Cook & Fields, 2007).

Nakamura (2009a) explored how, in WoW, race and racism are essentially covered up and are not viable topics of discussion (see also Bogost, 2009). Nonmajority races are only legitimate as played and thus unreal identities. This eases the way for majority cultures to continue racism online while denying its existence. Work in social cognition and minority representation on television by Dixon (2000) has explored how people are stereotyped into simplistic tropes and so are easier to deal with, or once categorized, not dealt with at all as real people. The oppression of minorities is standardized, and once minorities are conquered, they can be valorized into an idealistic trope (Merskin, 1998).

Race, according to Leonard (2006), is central to the narrative of fantasy game spaces: "How can one truly understand fantasy, violence, gender roles, plot, narrative, game playability, virtual realities, and the like without examining race, racism, and/or racial stratification?" In many games, there is no real difference in playing different races, as in the end the differences are neither substantial nor lived as they are in the real world (see the work on "race tourism," e.g., Leonard, 2003; Nakamura, 2001).

Lastowka (2006) pointed out the borrowing of minority cultural elements found in many fantasy games, asking an open question as to the ramifications. Higgin (2009) wrote about the problems with the uses of Black ethnicity in games, including WoW, which can simultaneously acknowledge and avoid race. As Nakamura (2009b) pointed out, "The paradox of race in America is that race is both hyper-visible . . . yet simultaneously made invisible." Hanley (2006) pointed out how all humans in WoW are coded as European (yet there is no "Europe" in WoW), while two other races have non-White identity markers.

Method

Elves are intertextual, and research into their presentation includes participant-observer methodology in gaming cultures: playing the games and reading a wide range of material. The game worlds were studied as texts for the meanings and interpretations of elves, as were official game rule books, game expansions, official works of fiction set in the game worlds, official game websites, and unofficial wikis.

The four game settings under study are the *Dragon Age* series (Origins and DA II), TES series (III: Morrowind, and TES IV: Oblivion), and two MMOs, WoW and EQ II. These games are all popular, but more importantly I have direct experience with five of the six (all but WoW), and to get a good understanding of how elves are presented one needs time spent in the game and its culture.

Studying elves in more than one fictional space is appropriate, as gamers and readers of fiction and fantasy rarely, if ever, play only one game or game series,

or read only one fantasy series by one author. Much as we learn about the ancient construction of the elf by looking at different stories from different times and places, so too can we learn about the modern construct of the elf and the cultural work it does by looking at different works of fiction that include elves.

A History of Elves

Today's elves are typically presented as magical, human-like with pointy ears, and as adept users of bows and arrows. Usually they can have children with humans. In medieval texts, we can see the origins of our elves, as they are magical creatures who can cause disease through magical arrows, or "elf-shot" (see Hall, 2007, chap. 4).

The two main inspirations for elves in present day games are, in my opinion, the writings of J. R. R. Tolkien and the fantasy game D&D. Both are found beyond their original boundaries: in movies, fiction by different authors, video games, wikis, and other spaces including the academic journal *Tolkien Studies*.

D&D was codified as a published game in the early 1970s. In the last 40 years, it has undergone several large-scale changes (called "editions," the current ruleset is the fourth edition). Many players are familiar with more than one edition. Gary Gygax, widely considered the father of the game, takes credit for creating D&D's dark elves, the drow. The drow would inspire dark elves in later games. Gygax designed the drow "to be the antithesis of the usual elves" (Smith, 2002); yet there is some confusion over the source of his inspiration (Gygax, 1979, 2007). Gygax does not list Tolkien, but mentions some older works such as Keightley's (1850) *The Fairy Mythology*, Kirk's (1691/1893) *The Secret Commonwealth of Elves, Fauns, and Fairies*, and possibly Leach and Fried's (1949) *Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend*.

Dark elves (and light elves) do have a historical precedent in *Snorra Edda*, a collection of Norse stories from the early 13th century (probably from between 1220 and 1241; see Hall, 2007). The author of *Snorra Edda*, Snorri Sturluson, described both light elves and dark elves. They parallel Christian angels (light) and fallen angels (dark), and there is evidence that Snorri used Christian texts as a source (Hall, 2007, p. 25). *Snorra Edda* is a piece of remix culture: it is "a complex blend of old and new" (Hall, 2007, pp. 23–24), much as today's elves are.

The dark elves do not solely parallel Christianity's fallen angels, they are also an adaptation of contemporary dwarves (Hall, 2007, p. 25), which were fit into Christian beliefs. Today's dwarves live in mountains, much as dark elves live underground. Initially, in the D&D folklore, "elves and the drow were one people" (Marmell, Pryor, Schwalb, & Vaughan, 2007, p. 32), but the drow fell from the grace of the surface world, like fallen angels. We can see our modern versions of dark elves in this ancient combination of the underground (dark) dwarves and evil (dark) fallen angels of Christianity.

Half-elves, in D&D, are not quite "White" either. They "have the same range of complexions as humans and elves" (Heinsoo, Collins & Wyatt, 2008, p. 42), yet

elves tend “more towards tan or brown hues” (Heinsoo et al., 2008, p. 41). “Elves have little body hair” (Heinsoo et al., 2008, p. 41). Between the skin color and lack of body hair, elves parallel real-world Native Americans and some Asians.

Also canonical, but outside of the game, are the fiction books set in the various campaign worlds of D&D. One series, by Weis and Hickman (2000), has a half-elf as a main character, Tanis Half-Elven. Tanis feels disassociated from both human and elves. He has grown his hair to cover his ears and grown a beard which elves cannot do. One character casts Tanis as “a half-elf trying to pass himself off as human” (p. 426), using the term *pass* as used by many academics. At one point a human, Riverwind, asks Tanis why he is “called half-elf and not half-man?” (p. 74) and Tanis is deeply insulted. Tanis was not fully accepted by his elven relatives either: he “learned early that he was different” from the elven children with whom he grew up (p. 178). Tanis’s feelings, albeit from 1984, parallel the much-later 2008 fourth edition description of half-elves: “Some are anxious about their place in the world, feeling no kinship with any race, except other half-elves” (Heinsoo et al., 2008, p. 42).

Another well-known D&D fiction writer, R. A. Salvatore, has created a popular drow character, Drizzt Do’Urden, who is featured in many of Salvatore’s canonical books. As of 2007, all 17 books featuring Drizzt (from over 20 years) had been on the *New York Times* bestseller list (Business Wire, 2007). Those who preside over the Drizzt Wikipedia page have written how “Salvatore uses Drizzt to represent issues of racial prejudice” (Drizzt, n.d.). Drizzt has somehow rejected his evil nature but is often judged as evil.

In one of the many Drizzt books, there are section breaks that read like Drizzt’s journal (Salvatore, 2003). In one entry, he discusses how he and a human are in love, and wonders about children with her, half-elves, and half-drow (p. 255). Although half-elves exist, he does not know of any half-drow. He fears their children would face bigotry in the form of “terrific pressures and prejudices” (p. 256).

Ed Greenwood, who created D&D’s Forgotten Realms setting, has several D&D-inspired books (e.g., Greenwood, 2007) where instead of D&D’s drow he writes about his own drow-like version of dark elves (dark-skinned, living underground, slave-owning, and evil). In one story, although dark elves detest humans and humans in turn fear the “nightskins” who raid the surface and enslave them, dark elves and humans can find each other attractive (pp. 59, 72, 94) and even fall in love with each other (p. 288).

Tolkien’s backstory for his elves is similarly not straightforward. Tolkien created his elves as a different version of humans in a thematic sense. In his nonfiction writing, he approaches these distinctions in a few different ways, but always with the same thematics in mind: “They represent really Men with greatly enhanced aesthetic and creative facilities, greater beauty and longer life, and nobility” (Carpenter, 2000, p. 176, #144). “Elves are certain aspects of Men and their talents and desires, incarnated in my little world. They have certain freedoms and power we should like to have” (Carpenter, 2000, p. 189, #153). One can see here the common fantasy trope

of the high elf, although nobility is often translated with some negativity into aloofness.

Tolkien also addressed biological differences, although because his work is fiction there is no real biology to address. “Elves and Men are evidently in biological terms one race, or they could not breed and produce fertile offspring—even as a rare event: there are 2 cases only in my legends of such unions” (Carpenter, 2000, p. 189, #153) and that “Elves and Men are represented as biologically akin in this ‘history’” (Carpenter, 2000, p. 189, #153). Note that Tolkien used the term *race*, not *species*.

The thematic differences and biological closeness were because humans and elves were, at their roots, the same. “Elves and Men are just different aspects of the Humane,” physically they were the same (if not different in appearance), but in terms of their spirits (or souls) they represented different approaches, which led to different aesthetics and a type of immortality for elves (Carpenter, 2000, p. 236, #181).

Tolkien’s inspirations for his elves have deep and complex roots, with the primary inspiration coming from older forms:

His ideas regarding Elves go back to both medieval and Victorian depictions of these peoples, which were developed early in his life through his learning and reading of ancient and medieval languages and literatures, and eventually to the development of his own languages. (Eden, 2007, p. 150)

According to Eden, Tolkien’s reading of medieval writings led him to encounter elves that were not little fairies, but were “powerful, strange, and as tall as humans but living in a different space and time,” (p. 150) referring to their ability to bring a human to the elven realm for a what appeared to be a day while a year passed in the human world.

Half-elves do exist in Tolkien’s setting, but only very few. Of them, Elrond plays a major part in Tolkien’s stories, although he is referred to as both an elf and a half-elf, even though he is technically 5/8 elf (Elrond, n.d.). Adding difficulty to the interpretation is that Elrond and his full brother Elros are told they must choose between being elf and being human (as are Elrond’s children), and Elrond chooses elf while Elros chooses human (Thomas, 2007). Elf/human in Tolkien’s narrative is not simple genetics or inheritance, there are both thematic (meta-narrative) and magical (within-narrative) elements to the distinction.

Tolkien’s world has many groupings of elves that go by different names, such as wood elves, high-elves, grey-elves, and “Elves of the Light” (Dickerson, 2007), but these do not translate into other fantasy settings in a meaningful way.

Movie (visual) representations of Tolkien’s work are predominantly White (Miller, 2011). In the recent *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the heroes and main characters are all White and are played by White actors and actresses, while the evil and barbaric orcs are dark-skinned, reflecting their portrayal from the texts (Knaus, 2005). Real-world racism does fit Tolkien’s work rather easily for the most part, but it is not straightforward (Rearick, 2004).

Game designers are aware of elves from other, older sources than just D&D and Tolkien, as pointed out by Greenwood (2007, pp. 295–298). One other recent source worth acknowledging is Wendy and Richard Pini, creators of the much-loved *Elfquest* series of comics (Sanderson, 1985). *Elfquest*'s elves fit the idea of “elf shot,” but do not fit with most fantasy elves beyond that. One *Elfquest* fan, complaining how fantasy takes place in “McEurope,” said that “When you have a group of people who live in trees, commune with nature, and are magical, they’re savage, barbarian cannibals, or at best, primitives . . . unless they’re white—then they’re Elves” (Chris, 2008).

Present-Day Game Narratives

Elves, half-elves, and dark elves are not presented with complete consistency across the four spaces under study here, nor do half-elves and dark elves always exist. They nonetheless form a coherent picture. First, I will describe elves in the two solo-player game series, DA and TES and then I will explore the treatment of elves in the two MMOs, WoW and EQ II.

In DA, there are basically two types of elves: city elves, who live in human cities, usually their own ghetto-like section of town called the alienage; and elves that still live in the forest, the Dalish elves, who live a nomadic existence but are in tune with nature. In terms of skills, elves generally are magical, use bows, or are good thieves.

The alienage is a powerful narrative concept, although it is treated somewhat differently in the two games. In *Origins*, the human rulers of the city have closed off access to the alienage due to a supposed plague. The alienage looks run down and there are beggars who ask you for help. In DA II, which is set in a different location and takes places later, the alienage is open to the rest of the city, is not run down, and there are no beggars.

The official in-game lore for everything that needs explanation can be found in the player's *codex*. Codex entries are writings and stories, perhaps from the distant past, and the author's point of view may not be accurate. The entry for alienage is written by a city elf, and shows how the game designers frame alienages from an elven point of view.

There have always been alienages. They have been around for as long as elves and shems [humans] have lived in the same lands. Ours isn't even the worst: they say that Val Royeaux has ten thousand elves living in a space no bigger than Denerim's market. Their walls are supposedly so high that daylight doesn't reach the vhenadahll until midday.

But don't be so anxious to start tearing down the walls and picking fights with the guards. They keep out more than they keep in. We don't have to live here, you know. Sometimes a family gets a good break, and they buy a house in the docks, or the outskirts of town. If they're lucky, they come back to the alienage after the looters have burned their house down. The unlucky ones just go to the paupers' field.

Here, we're among family. We look out for each other. Here, we do what we can to remember the old ways. The flat-ears who have gone out there, they're stuck. They'll never be human, and they've gone and thrown away being elven, too. So where does that leave them? Nowhere. (Codex entry: Alienage culture, n.d.)

One prominent feature of elven alienages is the large tree that elves grow in the central square, the vhenadahl. It represent the elves' connection with nature, and in DA II the base of the vhenadahl is brightly painted in a symbolic manner. Elves in DA have suffered loss of their heritage over their long existence, in the past they were greater people with greater magical power and great cities.

Mostly the old ways are gone. Each generation forgets a little more of the old tongue, a little more of the traditions. And the few things we keep become simple habits, the meaning long since faded.

So it is with the vhenadahl, the tree of the people. Every alienage has one, I'm told. Or they used to. When I was a little girl, my mother told me the tree was a symbol of Arlathan, but not even she knew more. Keeping the vhenadahl is just a habit, now. Many cities have let theirs wither and die, then chopped them up for firewood. No great loss. (Codex entry: Vhenadahl, n.d.)

They planted a tree in the middle of the alienage long ago. Today it stands tall, healthy and green in sharp contrast to the city around it. For we [city elves] are the poorest of the poor, the unwanted and the unwelcome huddled on the other side of the wall that separates us from the human part of the city. We are allowed to go there, to work on the docks or in their taverns and in their homes, but when dusk comes we must return. Any elf caught outside the alienage at night is likely to be mistaken for a sneak-thief or a pickpocket and let us be honest, the ones that stay out there at night probably are.

Our elder tells us that the tree is called the vhenadahl, and in the ancient elven tongue that means tree of the people. Its roots are deep and the elder says that as long as the vhenadahl lives so shall we. But he also says that there was once a time when our people lived in their own lands. He says that we were once ageless and strong, that it was the humans who took all this from us. (Bioware, City elf, n.d.)

This description comes from a city elf who lives in an alienage. The narrative for the city elf origin is, "You have always lived under the heavy thumb of your human overlords, but when a local lord claiming his privilege with the bride shatters your wedding day, the simmering racial tensions explode in a rain of vengeance" (Origins, n.d.).

In addition to their loss of land, culture, and enslavement, elves in DA are further presented as a minority other, in some examples with obvious parallels to Native Americans. They called their land "Place of our People," they recount how "our ancestors proved susceptible to human diseases," and how,

In our centuries of slavery we had lost our immortality, our language, our culture, our crafts . . . but never our sense of belonging to each other. From across Thedas we came

to the Dales. We walked on foot, sometimes crossing thousands of miles with naught but our will to sustain us. Many of us perished on the Long Walk . . . (Bioware, The history of the elves, n.d.)

“The Long Walk” is the name of a forced relocation of Navajo American Indians in 1864 by the U.S. military. These multiple parallels are not lost on the fans of the series, as can be seen in the following wiki entry:

Elves culturally resemble a variety of nomadic, polytheistic and animistic peoples who’ve been robbed of their land and much of their culture by conquerors, missionaries, settlers and colonists from more technologically advanced nations. Even the elven word for their own people means, “the people” just like the counterparts of for example Native Americans and Ainu. Ainu are also one of the peoples known for their tattoos. The Dalish also seem to resemble the Celts, who were also known for their war-tattoos, and who also were subject to discrimination and loss of their homelands: first from the Romans, and later the Anglo-Saxons. As a traveling people, they [the elves] also bear some resemblance to the Roma.

The elves may also be considered as an allegory for European Jews in that they were scattered across the land by an invasion (the destruction of Elvhenan allegorical to the Roman sack of Jerusalem) and are often ghetto-ized in cities (the alienages allegorical to the pre-WWII Jewish quarters of European cities), and are the subject of discrimination. The elves relationship to Andraste and the Chantry may also be inspired partly by Jewish history wherein Jesus and many early Christians were Jews (as the elves were allies of Andraste) but the Catholic Church became more antisemitic during the medieval period (as the Chantry later led Exalted Marches against the Elves).

The elves of old may represent advanced precolonial American civilizations, while the current elves may represent the status of postcolonial Native Americans. Elves also tended to have Anglo-American accents in *Dragon Age: Origins*, but that “lack” of an accent may also merely symbolize their loss of their own heritage. (Elves, n.d.)

Alienages could also be seen as a parallel to, or reminiscent of, Chinatowns found around the world. In *DA II*, elves were enslaved by humans for hundreds of years. Slavery (of elves) is still legal in one nation in the game, but it is not a region that can be visited in either of the games to date.

In *DA*, half-elves do not exist per se, as any child with an elf and a human parent is an “elf-blooded” human: someone who looks human, and is considered human, but perhaps with some elven characteristics. *DA* designer David Gaider explained how the children of elves and humans, in game, are “always fully human (albeit possibly with some minor elven physical traits and therefore such humans are often called ‘elf-blooded’)” (Gaider, 2007). There is one half-elf in a questline in *DAII*, named Feynriel, who looks human: “Feynriel is a human, born of his Dalish elven mother” (Feynriel, n.d.). Although he “is” human, his father “had no desire to raise an elf-blooded human” (Feynriel, n.d.).

In TES series, there are the three classic elven types (high, wood, and dark), and half-elves exist in an atypical manner. The history and lore in TES series have been built up across the games in the series and can often be found in the dozens of books that the player can read and collect in game (see Lore: Books by subject, n.d.). Much like codex entries in DA, books in TES are by a variety of authors with a variety of motivations or incomplete knowledge.

One in-game book addresses the issue of mixed-race children, and the use of the word “race.”

After much analysis of living specimens, the Council long ago determined that all “races” of elves and humans may mate with each other and bear fertile offspring. Generally the offspring bear the racial traits of the mother, though some traces of the father’s race may also be present. (Lore: Notes on Racial Phylogeny, n.d.)

This approach solves two problems at the same time. Even though the world may look fixed in terms of race, every character could actually be mixed race, and this means the game only needs a small set of character body or facial types and not the much larger set with every possible mixed race. This does beg the question of how change happens at all, if children take after their mother. The text continues, and the in-game writers consider how,

One might further wonder whether the proper classification of these same “races,” to use the imprecise but useful term, should be made from the assumption of a common heritage and the differences between them have arisen from magickal [sic] experimentation . . . or from gradual changes from one generation to the next.

Much as in the real world, “race” is “imprecise but useful.” The idea of “gradual changes” fits our real-world conceptions which we want to apply to the game world, although if children follow their mother, then any change at all seems unlikely and children who look only like their mother contradicts what we know about inheritance.

High elves (called *altmer*) in TES are typical for “high” elves from other settings. They are adept at using magic, are somewhat arrogant, and like many elves have long life spans. Wood elves (*bosmer*) are the naturalist, bow-using version of elves who live in the forest. Dark elves (*dunmer*) do not live underground and are not overtly evil, but are both visually and thematically dark: “‘Dark’ is commonly understood as meaning such characteristics as ‘dark-skinned’, ‘gloomy’, ‘ill-favored by fate’ and so on” (Oblivion: Dunmer, n.d.).

The Bretons of TES have French names (although Breton is a Celtic language) and are a variant of half-elves, presented as a human “race.” They are the descendants of earlier humans and elves, “a mongrel race between elf and human” (Lore: PGE3, n.d.). They are human, yet in terms of the fantasy in-game genetics they have elven ancestry. Apparently, there are no recent half-elves of human-elf parentage in

TES; the Bretons are instead a self-sustaining community. Both elves and humans share a perhaps mythical ancestor, the Ehlnofey (Lore: The annotated annals, n.d.).

There are other “others” in the TES world, such as the human Redguards who look like African Americans. In the game’s creation myths, Redguards broke away from the other human races at an earlier time. Visually, they are based on a real-world “other,” but there is no Africa in TES. In terms of real-world issues, there is a brief discussion of racism on the wiki’s Redguard talk page, and the page is semiprotected to deter the racist vandalism that the page was suffering (Oblivion Talk: Redguard, n.d.). The voice acting for Redguards is done by Michael Mack (for the men) and Gayle Jessup (for the women), both of whom are African Americans.

The two MMOs under consideration here, EQ II and WoW, are controlled by their designers much to the same extent as DA and TES are. Typically, there is no bigotry based on the race of another player’s character unless you are on a role-playing server and players are taking the game’s backstory seriously, playing out interspecies tension (Schwartz, 2006). Besides that, there is no real player-based bigoted behavior based on the race of another player’s character (although there may be some built-in to the narrative), but there is bigotry based on the perceived race of the actual human player (e.g., Nakamura, 2009a).

WoW is divided into two factions, the Alliance and the Horde. Generally, the Alliance is considered the good faction and the Horde evil (Horde members include goblins, orcs, trolls, and the undead), but there are players and scholars who disagree with this viewpoint (see Castronova, 2005). With this simplified good/evil split, the presentation of light and dark elves is reversed from its norm: the “White” elves, with light skin and blonde hair (the blood elves), are members of the Horde, and the “Black” elves (night elves), who are a purple hue with dark hair are members of the Alliance. This reversal of the traditional elven coloring and good/evil tropes is one of the ways in which Blizzard has both complexified and negated the overall good/evil framework in WoW.

Players can choose to play a blood elf or a night elf, but not other elf types, as high elves are part of the backstory, and there are almost no half-elves. According to the wiki Wowpedia (Half-elf, n.d.), there is only one verifiable half-elf in the game, Arator. The canonical rules for the tabletop WoW RPG do have playable half-elves: they are half-high elf, although the rules allow blood elves or night elves as a parent (Kiley, 2006, pp. 11–12). Wowpedia refers to this, acknowledging the intertextuality of half-elves within the WoW gamespace: “At the point in time that the Warcraft RPG books take place, the half-elves of human-high elven descent number in the thousands” (Half-elf, n.d.). Typically, half-elves do not fit in with human or elves: “History reveals certain prejudices against half-elves” (Kiley, 2006, p. 11). They also fall under the “one-drop” theory: “Half-elf is a term used to describe the offspring of an elven or half-elven parent and a parent of any other species (such as a human)” (Half-elf, n.d.).

Although elves are typically framed as an other, in WoW elves are a popular character type. According to one survey, humans are the most popular choice

(17%), while blood elves (14%) and night elves (12%) are second and third, making blood elves the most chosen race in the Horde (WarcraftRealms, 2011; see also Yee, 2010).

There is an added dimension to “the other” in WoW which involves the Alliance/Horde dichotomy. By some, the Horde is seen as tribal and the Alliance is seen as modern and Western. Higgin (2009) wrote how some races in WoW appropriate “various forms of ethnicity or blackness. For example, the Trolls have pronounced and unquestionable Jamaican accents and the Tauren are a mystical and tribal culture with Native American architecture and dress” (p. 9). Both races are allied with the Horde. Langer (2008) wrote that, on the Alliance side, “humans correspond with white British and white American people; and dwarves correlate to the Scottish” (p. 89). Lastowka (2006) asked about “the arguably colonialist theme of WoW (pitting the technologically advanced Euro-Alliance against the ‘native’ Horde),” offering this idea as supposition, albeit a supportable one (See also Thorn, 2004, for “marking” the other).

The Horde, according to Langer (2008), “is depicted as a ragtag bunch of peoples whose belief systems and aesthetic senses borrow heavily from real-world cultures that have themselves been marginalized and colonized” (p. 87). She argued that “analyzing the Alliance and the Horde primarily within a dichotomy of good and evil is misdirected” (p. 87). Williams (2007) also stated how a simple good/evil dichotomy is inappropriate for WoW, as,

The races of World of Warcraft represent many diverse cultures which might seem racist at the first and briefest of glosses. But there is a depth and complexity here that suggests the use and appropriation of different ethnic groups represent a serious attempt at theme that goes beyond good versus evil. Blizzard not only acknowledges the existence of different cultures—something most fantasy games don’t attempt—they treat them with respect and use them to seriously consider the embarrassing (and ongoing) exploitation, subjugation, and disrespect for indigenous people.

Langer considered this as well, using a framework of the other for the Horde: “The central space of tension between the two sides is that between familiarity and otherness . . . World of Warcraft carries out a constant project of radically ‘othering’ the Horde . . . by distinctions between civilized and savage, self and other” (p. 87).

At one point in WoW’s backstory, the Alliance incarcerated the orcs in internment camps; yet orcs in WoW are not inherently or simplistically evil. These camps parallel DA’s elven alienages and the real-world parallels those have, such as relocating Native Americans, and the WWII-era Japanese-American internments in the U.S. and Jewish ghettos. It fits Lastowska’s (2006) colonialist idea. The Alliance even passed a law, the “Alliance Internment Act,” ordering the placement of orcs in camps, not unlike U.S. President Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9066 in 1942 for Japanese-Americans.

EQ II has the four classic elf types: high elves, wood elves, half-elves, and dark elves. The played experience is one where different races have no real differences except for a few superficial effects: some races are better at certain character types, and there are race-based quests. Like many settings, high elves and wood elves are good, while dark elves are evil, but there are few game play repercussions to this.

In the original EQ, there was a “Black” race, in the sense that they looked somewhat like African Americans: the Erudites. Higgin (2009) wrote how the Erudites were “Africanized equivalent models” (p. 14) but how in EQII they became “skeletal, Caucasoid, and vaguely extraterrestrial beings . . . washed out in shades of gray, purple, and blue” (p. 14). Gray, purple, and blue tones are what are used for some other “Black” characters, such as the dark elves in TES, WoW, and EQII (See also Taylor [2009, pp. 113–114] for race in the original EQ.)

Elves in EQII fit their tropes perfectly. The starting statistical bonuses for EQII elves make them good at using bows, poisons, or spells. “Elf-shot” lives on in today’s digital elves. High elves are “fair-skinned” and “they look down on other races as being less pure than themselves” (High Elf, n.d.). Dark elves “are the embodiment of evil and maliciousness” (Dark Elf, n.d.).

Half-elves are “caught between cultures” and “possess no heritage of their own and have long been forced to exist outside the boundaries of polite society” (Half Elf, n.d.). Half-elves “refer to themselves as Ayr’Dal, a term derived from the old elven word for “misfit.” Though often used by dark elves and high elves as an insult, the half-elves have embraced the word as a symbol of their unique place in the world” (Half Elf, n.d.), much as some real-world minority groups have appropriated words used as insults to them and made them their own.

Each race has a questline where players can learn more about the race of their character, and for elves these situate them within the EQII mythology. The half-elf lore book is written from the perspective of a half-elf who questions the terminology of inheritance and is the most revealing of the elven books.

Obviously, we’re called half-elves because half our blood is elvish. What makes the other half? Human! I don’t know that there’s any half-elf that’s like, half elf and half dwarf, so it’s always half-human. Why they don’t call us half-human, I don’t know. Actually, I do know: half-human is an insult. Which makes me wonder: is half-elf supposed to be an insult, too? (History of the Ayr’Dal, n.d.)

It is not clear why “half-human” is an insult, but recall this was also true for Tanis Half-Elven in the *Dragonlance* book series. The half-elf writer also questions the mathematics of inheritance with a bit of humor:

So, if a half-elf marries a half-elf and they have a child, is that child a quarter-elf? If a half-elf marries a full-elf . . . is their baby a three-quarters-elf? Could my descendants (if I have any) marry elves enough to eventually turn back into full-elves?

Each fantasy narrative has dealt with these questions in slightly different ways, which usually includes half-elves as a blanket term for all those of mixed human-elvish ancestry.

Conclusions

Elves are presented in similar ways across these spaces. Besides the pointy ears, there are several thematic continuities. High elves are usually concerned with “racial” purity and use magic. Wood elves, if present, are nature loving and use bows. Dark elves are evil, use magic and poisons, and may own slaves (odd through a Western lens given that they are “Black”). Half-elves do not fit in with either humans or elves. The ancient idea of “elf-shot” is still present in today’s digital elves, with their magic, bows, and poisons. Elves are sometimes presented as having lost their power or culture as they were colonized by humans.

Elves, as a textual creation, have consistently been produced by the same group over their long history: educated White males. The longevity of this consistency is somewhat startling. As Hall pointed out, “Most of our evidence for *aelfe* [elves] derives from texts produced by a small, learned, clerical, male, Southumbrian and probably noble section of Anglo-Saxon society” (Hall, 2007, p. 18), and Bioware’s Heir commented on “the lack of diversity just in the general industry, at least in North America” (Sheffield, 2011, p. 2). One industry report found that 83.3% of the game developers in their sample were White, leading them to say “we can clearly state that there is very little ‘ethnic’ diversity and that the stereotype of the game industry as predominantly white appears to have some basis” (IGDA, 2005, p. 10). 88.5% were male, and 80.4% had a college degree or greater. There are few notable exceptions for those who write about elves, such as the aforementioned *Elf-quest* with equal contributions from both Wendy and Richard Pini, and their elves are more complex than most of those here. This is not a condemnation of elves or whiteness, as elves are part of a long-standing tradition where Westerners can address the other. There are Whites who are “othered” out of existence in fantasy: dwarves (a.k.a. little people). Fantasy dwarves, although part of the “humane,” are not human: they live in mountains with other dwarves, only marry dwarves, and their children are dwarves. Real-world dwarves are human, can be of any race, and have both short and tall children. In a fantasy setting, if there are dwarves, there are no dwarves.

Fantasy games are based on earlier fantasy tropes, which, for English speakers in the United States and the United Kingdom, are based on European history and historical fantasy. It is predominantly a world of White people. Although that may be historically accurate to some extent, today’s world and the gaming industry are much more multicultural and international. The United States has always been a multicultural land with people of different colors and geopolitical origins. By whitewashing fantasy games, game makers are not addressing their diverse audiences nor are they modernizing their fantasy world settings by acknowledging the cultural changes that

have occurred since the medieval period. Although elves can be used to reflect or address real-world issues of otherness, the modernity of the gaming technology is not matched by the medieval whiteness of the peoples in games, and in-game “racism” usually is bigotry in name only, not in action.

The fantasy definition of the word *race* is of note. Players are well aware of the disjoint between real-world genetics and the fantasy aspects of half-breed genetics, as well as the disjoint between the idea of fantasy “races” and real-world species (e.g., *Where Are The Half-Races?* 2010). By using the word *race*, fantasy settings can and do play with their own versions of real-world issues, but it is in a shallow manner. EQII’s lore may talk about how high elves and dark elves hate each other, but players can have their high elf and dark elf characters stand side by side with zero ramifications from the game engine. As mentioned, some players, in more serious role-playing settings, may act out bigotry in order to conform to the game backstory (Schwartz, 2006), but this is player-driven. TES series has turned the evil of the dark elves into a dark disposition, and although in-game races do have varying dispositions towards races they do not like (a statistic in the game), it does not cause players much difficulty. In DA, the distrust between humans and elves is actually a narrative benefit and easily navigated by the player. In fiction, Tanis Half-Elven and Drizzt (the dark elf) worry about and encounter “racism,” but these are fictional stories.

As BioWare’s Heir said, “It’s not video game affirmative action. It’s about actually pushing our medium to make better games, to tell better stories in our games” (Sheffield, 2011, p. 1). BioWare’s Gaider raises similar issues, specifically for half-elves, but pointed out how there was not enough space on the DVD for it all. As he explained, “I’d like to get into it. I think it’s a possibility that has the potential for good drama, and even allowing the player to be elf-blooded might be cool in the future. But like I said, I’d want to do it justice” (Gaider, 2010). The other is consistently acknowledged via elves, but simultaneously this acknowledgment allows for avoidance of actual issues. Having elf slaves is acceptable, but human ones (especially if black or brown) would be difficult or impossible for a Western game company. Sticking elves in a ghetto acknowledges in-game and real-world human prejudices, but placing actual humans (such as Jews) in a ghetto runs into the same problems as human slaves. Tolkien used elves to represent the human in an idealized manner, today we use them to engage with our less-ideal aspects.

Elves, then, are a way we can narratively acknowledge and explore real-world racial problems in a safe manner. Yet they are also a way in which we can avoid the same problems, as racial tensions in fantasy games rarely exist between different human groups, most of whom are White. BioWare’s Heir has pointed out this narrative disjoint: “If you played the dark elves, you were treated like garbage by many of the townspeople. So, my only question is . . . why can’t we do that when we’re actually talking about real people?” (Sheffield, 2011, p. 1). Doing that when actually talking about real people in games would be too explosive, using elves as a stand-in is a much safer approach. However, game designers should reinforce their narrative about elves in their game mechanics, something which is rarely done. Fantasy games

should also strive to include non-White humans in narratively cohesive ways and in a nonstereotypical manner. Although elves are mostly a White version of non-White humans, there is room for both elves and non-White humans in fantasy games, and given the technological and narrative advances in games recently, game designers should address these shortcomings.

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AQ 10

Bios

Nathaniel Poor studies electronic communication technologies with a focus on their social, technological, historical, and legal aspects, and primarily researches internet technologies, games, and mobile devices.