

Language Ideologies and Stereotypes in Fantasy Video Games

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Language Ideologies and Stereotypes in Fantasy Video Games

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Master's Thesis

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Jezične ideologije i stereotipi u fantastičnim video igrama

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ABSTRACT

The way we speak can influence the way others perceive us, to the point of bringing social advantage or disadvantage. Language ideology is a set of beliefs about language that serves as a rationalization or justification of such biased value judgments. Media play a big role in spreading language ideology. Video games are a form of media that has been largely neglected by linguists, despite constituting a significant part of the 21st-century cultural corpus. Fantasy video games are an especially interesting genre, because they include fantasy races. In order to characterize different races, the fantasy genre often makes use of language ideology, from Tolkien to contemporary times. Fantasy races used to be bound to a description on paper which creates a mental image unique to each reader. But now, video games create the opportunity for a more immersive fantasy world, where players interact with characters that are given a visual model, and — importantly for this paper — a voice. This paper analyzes three fantasy video games to see to which extent they make use of language ideology, and if it can be detrimental to the real-world speakers of those varieties. It also assigns character roles to members of fantasy races in those video games to see which varieties and accents are assigned to which type of character. My findings are that video games that avoid the use of language ideology to characterize their fantasy races also allow the members of those races to fulfill a greater range of character roles, putting an emphasis on diversity.

1 Introduction

It is widely accepted in sociolinguistics that the way we speak tells a great deal about who we are — where we are from, our age and even gender. Sønnesyn (2011: 12) writes that we automatically use speech as a basis for evaluating others. While this can be beneficial for some speakers, it can also harm others. Garret states that “language variation carries social meanings and so can bring very different attitudinal reactions, or even social disadvantage or advantage” (2010: 2). For example, Coupland and Bishop (2007) conducted one of the most comprehensive studies of attitudes towards British accents, mapping informants’ reactions to 34 different accents of English. 5010 participants were asked to evaluate the different accents in terms of variables such as prestige and social attractiveness. These findings were further correlated with factors like informant age, gender and region (Coupland and Bishop 2007: 74). Several accents attracted similar findings for both social attractiveness and prestige, with Standard English getting high overall ratings. However, regional varieties, like the Birmingham, Liverpool and Manchester accents, got low ratings (Sønnesyn 2011: 15). Naturally, as Lippi-Green (1997: 11) emphasizes, “all spoken languages are equal in linguistic terms”, and there is no intrinsic quality that makes one accent superior or inferior compared to others. Sønnesyn (2011: 15) concludes that these judgments of accents and their speakers must therefore stem from other, non-linguistic factors. One of the most common explanations is the existence of so-called language ideologies. Woolard (1998:4) defines language ideology as a “set of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use.” In other words, it’s a set of assumptions about the spoken language of other people, which can affect one’s opinion of others. Dominant groups in a society establish a normative variety of the language. Standard English is defined by Trudgill (2000, 5-6) as “that variety of English which is usually used in print, and which is normally taught in schools and to non-native speakers learning the language. It is also the variety which is normally spoken by educated people and used in news broadcasts and other similar situations.” Lippi-Green (1997: 67) defines standard language ideology:

A bias toward an abstracted, idealized, homogeneous spoken language which is imposed and maintained by dominant bloc institutions and which names as its model the written language, but which is drawn primarily from the spoken language of the upper middle class.

Soares (2017: 8) states that language ideology can be used to maintain power in a society. The consequence of this is that non-standard varieties may start to be associated with lower social status. Stein (2018) gives examples of what language ideologies might look like in day-to-day life, e.g. “Southern speech is uneducated” or “New York speech is rude” (13). Soares (2017) claims that media play an important role in promoting standard language ideology, reinforcing linguistic stereotypes, and stigmatizing accents and dialects (13). A study by Sui and Paul (2017) reports that Latinos are more often portrayed in local TV news coverage in crime related reports and usually with a heavy accent. Similarly, in her survey of accents used in Hollywood and Disney characters, Lippi-Green (1997) finds that standard North American and RP accents are prevalent in lead roles, and non-standard accents are used mostly as negative stereotyping shortcuts. Lippi-Green (1997) also reports that this imagery repetitively presented in media along with certain stigmatized varieties of English can legitimize the assumptions made about speakers of these varieties. To conclude, language stereotypes can have real and harmful consequences for the speakers of stigmatized varieties, and research on language ideologies, as well as drawing attention to them, can be helpful in reducing their negative effect.

2 Why do Dwarves sound Scottish?

Fantasy genre was chosen as the focus of this paper because of the concept of fantasy races – different peoples that the author of a given fantasy setting has created to inhabit his or her world. When creating a fantasy race, the author wants it to be distinct from other races and factions they put in their world. The creator does not have the privilege of boring the audience with detailed lore on each race or character. Instead, the author needs to quickly capture the

attention of the audience. This is why each fantasy race is given certain qualities that make them distinct and easily recognizable. Fantasy authors often draw inspiration from the real world, which unfortunately also means that fantasy races can reinforce existing stereotypes about real-life groups of people.

Often called the father of the fantasy genre, J.R.R Tolkien is largely responsible for the concept of fantasy races as we know them today. His description of Elves, Hobbits, Orcs and Dwarves has had a huge influence on other fantasy writers, and even today it influences the way these races are portrayed and perceived. But this concept of different races, each with their own character, has also sparked debate on whether Tolkien's works are racist. For example, Heitritter (2014: 1) claims that: "In The Lord of the Rings trilogy, specifically, different races are not simply different, but are placed on a hierarchy in which some are clearly superior to others. More damning is that those races at the lower rungs of Tolkien's hierarchy are given the physical characteristics of existing races in the real world..." However, Tolkien did not use just physical characteristics to draw parallels between his fantasy races and real world people – it is language stereotypes that play a crucial role here. After all, Tolkien was a philologist, and he is known for placing intense focus on developing the languages of his fantasy races. Vink (2013: 123) summarizes how the language of Tolkien's Dwarves is connected to their personality:

In a BBC radio interview with Dennis Gueroult, recorded in 1964 and broadcast the next year, Tolkien connected his Dwarves with the Jewish people, stating: "The Dwarves of course are quite obviously—wouldn't you say that in many ways they remind you of the Jews? Their words are Semitic obviously, constructed to be Semitic." Also in 1964, Tolkien wrote to W.R. Matthews: "The language of the Dwarves . . . is Semitic in cast, leaning phonetically to Hebrew (as suits the Dwarvish character)."

"As suits the Dwarvish character" clearly indicates that Tolkien believed that the language of a certain group says something about their character, and he used that same belief to construct his fantasy races. As other fantasy writers continue in his steps, they often reinforce this language ideology, whether consciously or unconsciously.

In the characterization of his races, Tolkien was limited to the written word and the imagery his words invoke in the minds of his readers. However, technological advances have

opened up a whole new realm of possibilities. The movie adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings* reached a cult status among fantasy fans, and the movie representation of Tolkien's races is firmly ingrained in the mind's eye of the fantasy community. This is why Dwarves are nowadays associated with the almost cartoonish ideal of the Scottish accent, even if that was not Tolkien's intention. The Elves' way of speech, however, has remained largely unchanged throughout the years - the stereotypical fantasy Elf sounds "like British royalty" (Grundhauser 2016).

In visual media, including video games, accent is one way of making it easier for the audience to quickly distinguish between different characters and their backgrounds. Soares (2017: 15) states that there is a correlation between accent and speaker identity recognition, in other words, individuals attribute different traits to different accents. Therefore, language attitudes attached to specific accents are important factors in determining the identity and personality of the character to whom they have been assigned. As Lippi-Green (1997:104) puts it, language varieties are used "as a shortcut to quickly convey character traits without having to establish them through complex expositional narrative."

3 Videogames and language ideologies

Despite the fact that they constitute a significant part of the 21st century cultural corpus, video games are a form of media where language-ideological research is most notably still in its infancy (Stein 2018: 5). Even though language in games has been neglected by linguists, Stein claims that videogames, just as other media, reflect the ideological perspectives of their designers, whether they implement them consciously or not (2018: 5). In 2017, 65% of households in the US had at least one member who played three or more hours of videogames a week (qtd. in Stein 2018: 9). Stein claims that this fascination, as well as the medium's economic success and wide audience reach, makes videogames a great candidate for linguistic and literary analysis (2018: 10). Games differ from other media in one crucial feature: interactivity. Videogames allow the players to change the outcome of the narrative, and they put the players in an actual geographical space which they can explore (Stein 2018: 10). Interactivity, combined with the bodily experience that results from the physical input of game controls, creates immersion. Stein describes immersion as "a feeling of being situated within the digital world"

(2018: 11). Ensslin (2012: 138) explains the potential influence of immersion on language ideologies:

Gaming is thus a multisensory, immersive experience that potentially obstructs the cognitive distance required to ‘close-read’ and reflect critically on individual semiotic modes and one’s own interaction with them. This makes gamers significantly more ideologically susceptible than, say, readers of a novel. For the sake of successful gameplay, players prioritise rule implementation and interface interaction over the critical reception of individual representational modes such as NPCs’ voices and linguistic accents (138).

In other words, because of immersion, players have a harder time filtering out ideological signals in videogames. Stein (2018: 11) states that “players might thus more easily adopt attitudes towards language varieties than through less immersive media forms.”

4 Methodology

The first goal of this paper is to determine which variety of English is being spoken by characters from video games chosen for the analysis. Phonological, morpho-syntactic and lexical markers that are used for depicting player and non-player characters will be taken into account and then paired with varieties of English. Since these are fictional characters, and the way they speak is the result of the writers’ and the voice actors’ work, some deviations are to be expected. As Stein (2018: 35) points out: “It is often not clear how ‘authentic’ game varieties are, because voice actors may or may not be the native speakers of the target accent.” Additionally, in a game development process, a perfect imitation of an already existing variety may not be desired. As a consequence, the final result may be a mix of different varieties. After having compared the characters’ way of speaking to real world varieties of English, the next step is trying to find possible connections between that and their personality and background, as well as the way they are being presented to the audience. The way characters treat each other will also be taken into account, in order to establish if the characters speaking standard varieties are being treated better in the game universe. All of this is what Sønnesyn calls “building characters” in a video game narrative (2011: 40). For this step, a modified version of Sønnesyn’s categorization of

non-linguistic variables will be used. She categorizes characters into seven different roles: “hero/heroine, villain, aide to hero/heroine, aide to villain, authority figure, unsympathetic character and character with peripheral role” (2011: 41).

4.1 The Hero(es)

The hero or heroine is the narrative's central character, in other words, the one the plot revolves around. The traditional hero is a positive character, with qualities such as “kindness, courage, strength and a strong sense of justice” (Sønnesyn 2011: 41). It is also most often the character the audience is supposed to identify and sympathize with. In the context of a videogame, the hero is usually the main character - the character that the player controls and plays as. This is especially the case in role-playing games, in which the player has the ability to make choices for the main character. The hypothesis of this paper is that this inevitably causes the player to feel closer to the main character than they would if they were, for example, watching a movie or reading a book. Coming back to the concept of immersion, it can be hypothesized that the cognitive distance required to critically reflect on language ideologies is greatly obstructed by being literally put in charge of a character's decision. Therefore, one of the focal points of the analysis is whether the main character is presented more favorably, and whether they speak a more 'desirable' variety of English.

4.2 The Villain

The antithesis to the hero is the villain. Sønnesyn (2011: 42) describes the villain as “the opposing force to the hero/heroine, and the one who tries to prevent the hero/heroine from fulfilling his or her mission.” Of course, a narrative can have more than one villain. While heroes possess positive qualities, villains tend to be morally bad. In a videogame, the villain is usually the person the player has to defeat in order to finish the game, or to pass a certain stage of a game. Villains in videogames are often called 'bosses', a word which denotes an especially difficult opponent that clearly differs from other enemies in the game. However, not every character who would be called a villain needs necessarily be a boss.

4.3 Friendly NPC

Sønnesyn names her third and fourth category "aides to hero/heroine and villain, respectively" (2011: 42). She claims that these sidekicks "often tend to be less intelligent", and they "provide humorous elements in the story" (2011: 42). Since her work is about Disney movies, these categories make a lot of sense, since every Disney movie has these sorts of characters. However, these categories do not translate well to the videogame format. This is why this paper replaces the "aide to the hero" category with a category named *friendly non-player character* or *friendly NPC* for short. The main difference is that this type of character does not have to be less intelligent than the hero, and does not always serve as comic relief. In short, it is a character that is friendly towards the main character, or a character that possesses similar positive qualities as the hero, but is not controlled by the player. Sønnesyn's category "aide to the villain" is completely removed, and they are all sorted into the category of villain.

4.4 Unsympathetic characters

Sønnesyn's next category is called "unsympathetic characters" (2011: 42). She describes them as characters who "do not show any particular involvement on behalf of the main characters" (Sønnesyn 2011: 42). While Sønnesyn admits that the line between this category and the category of characters with a peripheral role is somewhat blurry, it is still included in this analysis, for characters that are prominent in the game, but are neither friendly NPCs nor villains - the characters that are often called 'morally gray'.

4.5 Authority figure

Sønnesyn's last central character category is called "authority figure" (2011: 42). It consists of characters that act as advisors or caretakers, or are authority figures in other ways, such as employers, people of a higher rank etc. Such characters are common in videogames, and can be either friendly or hostile towards the player. Either way, it will be interesting to see what way of speech is assigned to people in charge.

4.6 Character with peripheral role

Sønnesyn's final category is "character with peripheral role" (2011: 42). These are minor characters that don't play a prominent role. In videogames, these are usually minor NPCs.

4.7 Love interest

Aside from these categories, this paper includes one more category: *love interest*. This includes characters that are romanceable by the player. What this means is that the player has the ability to unlock special romantic scenes, and sometimes even a special ending, with this character, provided that the player chooses the correct dialogue options or other choices. Not every game in my analysis has love interests - they usually appear in role-playing games. However, the fact that the player is the one that chooses the love interest they want to be with means that the love interest must be designed in a way that would appeal to the average player. Character design includes the way the character speaks, so it will be interesting to observe what varieties are deemed most attractive.

To sum up, this analysis will include 7 categories: hero/heroine, villain, friendly NPC, unsympathetic character, authority figure, love interest, and finally character with peripheral role.

5 Selection of videogames

The games chosen for analysis are *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (CD Projekt RED 2015), *Dragon Age: Origins* (BioWare 2009), and *Warhammer: Vermintide 1 & 2* (Fatshark 2015 and 2018). These games were chosen because they are all well-known, very popular games, especially *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*, which has had a huge cultural impact. Secondly, all these games contain a variety of fantasy races. Thirdly, while all three games fall into the genre of fantasy, they are different enough regarding the setting, gameplay mechanics, and year of publishing, which makes them interesting to compare.

6 The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt is an open world roleplaying game. This means that the player takes control of the main character - travelling The Northern Kingdoms, the fictional region where the game takes place, deciding what to say when talking to other characters and battling monsters and men alike. *The Witcher* videogame franchise, created by the Polish studio CD Projekt RED, is based on the Polish novels by Andrzej Sapkowski. This is important because the games, just as the novels, stray from the typical Tolkienesque fantasy, and instead heavily draw

on Slavic folklore and European fairy tales. This, combined with the immense popularity and commercial success of the games, has resulted in *The Witcher* series becoming a sort of a symbol for Slavic pride. When ex-POTUS Barrack Obama was visiting Poland, it is no coincidence that it was a copy of the *The Witcher 2* that was chosen as an official gift from the Polish Prime Minister. This Slavic influence is evident in almost every aspect of the third installment of the games - music, atmosphere, story, visuals, and even the names of places and people, which is the most interesting linguistically. This is why one of the goals of this section of the paper is to explore if this effort to move away from Tolkien-style fantasy applies to the way characters speak as well. The main character of this videogame is Geralt of Rivia – a professional monster hunter in search of his adopted daughter, Ciri. Along the way, he can decide to help both common people and key political players, which has often unforeseen consequences for himself, other individuals and even political parties.

6.1 Humans

Geralt is a member of the human race, and he belongs to the category of *hero*. In addition to being the main character, he displays many traditional hero qualities, such as courage and sense of justice. Geralt is voiced by Doug Cockle, an American voice actor. Geralt’s variety seems to be identical to his voice actor’s – General American English. The table below showcases some General American features that are prominent in Geralt’s speech.

| Feature | Example |
|--|--|
| Rhoticity | “Geralt of Rivia. Witcher [ˈwɪtʃər]. With tenure [ˈtɛnjər].” (Dani J Gaming 2016, 0:22). |
| T-flapping | “Amusing as this little [ˈlɪrɪ] show is, I’m getting [ˈgɛrɪŋ] bored” (Dani J Gaming 2016, 7:28). |
| <i>Bath</i> vowel as [æ] | “You never asked [æskt]” (Dani J Gaming 2016, 9:41). |
| Omission of auxiliaries or pronouns in questions | “Got a brush?” (Dani J Gaming 2016, 10:41) “Think so?” (10:48). |

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Use of <i>gonna</i> | “Can’t seriously think I’m gonna chase down your goat” (Dani J Gaming 2016, 3:55). |
|---------------------|--|

Aside from Geralt, there are many other humans in the game, encompassing every one of the seven categories. Their speech varies wildly, depending not only on their geographic location, but also on their social status.

6.2 Dwarves

The most prominent Dwarf character in the game is Zoltan Chivay, Geralt’s friend. He belongs to the *friendly NPC* category. He is voiced by Alexander Morton, who is Scottish, and Zoltan’s variety undoubtedly sounds like Scottish English, even to the layman’s ear. The table contains some of Zoltan’s voice lines that illustrate Scottish English features.

| Feature | Example |
|--|---|
| Rhoticity with alveolar trill | “Long enough for them to turn our [ʒːr] home into theirs [ðɛːrs].” (Savage Discavage 2015, 0:53). |
| Use of regional and colloquial lexeme variants | “We’ve a <i>wee</i> problem, then” (Savage Discavage 2015, 2:43). “A <i>shitestorm</i> ” (3:03). “I’ll ask the <i>lasses</i> on my half...” (4:50). |
| Monophthongization | “Need to do a wee bit o’ tidyin’ ‘fore I go [go:]” (Savage Discavage 2015, 5:13). “In the nick of time, as always [ˈɔːlweːz]!” (0:42) |
| Word-final /ɪŋ/ realized as [ɪn] | “Need to do a wee bit o’ tidyin’ [ˈtaɪdɪn] ‘fore I go” (Savage Discavage 2015, 5:13). |

Other Dwarves in the game belong to either friendly NPC, unsympathetic character, character with peripheral role, or villain categories. Notably, there are no Dwarf heroes, love interests or authority figures. All Dwarves in the game speak very similarly, i.e. Scottish English. They all also have very similar physical and personality traits. Physically, they are shorter and sturdier than humans, with long beards. Their notable characteristics include a love for strong liquor, stubbornness, straightforwardness, and business acumen. A journal entry from *The Witcher 1* describes them as ‘gruff’ and ‘renowned for their stubbornness’. In *The Witcher 2*, the journal entry notes that Dwarves ‘are sometimes seen as grumpy, unkind and greedy’. In *The Witcher 3*, there is no journal entry for Dwarves, but Zoltan Chivay is described as ‘a lover of rough drinks and rougher songs’. Some of these traits directly correlate to stereotypes connected to the Scottish people. Like Dominic Watt says for Atlas Obscura: “Shrewdness, honesty, straight-forward speaking. Those are the sorts of ideas that the [Scottish] accent tends to evoke” (Grundhauser 2016). Watt also notes that Scottish accent evokes “cultural stereotypes surrounding the drinking habits of Dwarves and Scots” (Grundhauser 2016). In *The Witcher* universe, Dwarves are discriminated against and even persecuted by humans. While none of the hero characters are involved in such bigoted acts, this poses the question of what kind of message is being sent to the consumer of *The Witcher* games if the group that both speaks and acts like a real world group of people (i.e. the Scottish people) is the subject of systemic discrimination.

6.3 Elves

Another non-human race in The Witcher universe are the Elves, or the *Aen Seidhe*, as they call themselves. A proud and ancient race, they speak a language called the Elder Speech. Elder Speech draws its vocabulary heavily and very obviously from Celtic languages. For example, the Elves call Geralt *Gwynbleidd*, which is directly borrowed from Welsh, meaning White Wolf. When communicating with humans, the Elves’ speech is still very much littered with Elder Speech expressions, and even whole sentences, implying that they are not able to — or refuse to — completely adopt the Common tongue the way the Dwarves do. Similarly, while the Dwarves are largely trying to peacefully coexist with humans, the Elves often live in the woods, forming guerilla squads and attacking humans. Parallels can be drawn here to Irish national pride, the focus on nature in their folklore, as well as their armed rebellions against the

British. It is surprising, then, that CD Projekt RED chose to have the Elves in *The Witcher 3* video game speak RP. The table has examples of some RP features in their speech.

| Feature | Example |
|---------------------------|---|
| Non-rhoticity | “I must just fetch some water [ˈwɔːtə]” (CJake3 2017, 0:40). |
| <i>Bath</i> vowel as [ɑː] | “The bastard [ˈbɑːstəd] sold it all” (Ayush Kamboj 2017, 0: 54). |
| No T-flapping | “We neither need nor want your pity [pɪti]” (CJake3 2017, 1:43). |

Stein explains that RP is still regarded as a prestigious variety, spoken by the upper class. (2018: 22). Thus, the Elves in *The Witcher 3* invoke both the Tolkien-inspired-RP-speaking elegance, and the more wild — even violent — mental image of rebelling against oppression. Just like the Dwarves, the Elves all use the same variety, sending the message that they are all very similar to each other. When it comes to their role in the videogame, all Elves can be categorized as either villains, characters with peripheral role, or unsympathetic characters. This is consistent with Sønnesyn’s findings about Disney movies: “RP, in particular, and English with other accent are judged more suitable to villains than heroes” (2011: 81). Thus, the combination of both Celtic vocabulary and RP accent paints the Elves as an antagonistic and savage group.

7 Dragon Age: Origins

DA: Origins is a role-playing videogame set in the fictional kingdom of Ferelden, which is inhabited by humanoid races of Humans, Elves, Dwarves and Qunari, as well as a number of monster races. What makes it different from *The Witcher 3* is that the player character in *Dragon Age: Origins* does not control an already established character. Instead, the player can choose which race their character belongs to, as well as their background and abilities. Another interesting point is that the main character is the only character in the game that is not voiced.

This means that the player can project their own identity, including speech variety, onto the main character. In other words, the player’s own character is untouched by language ideologies, which might make the player less perceptive of when language ideologies are being used to present other characters in the game. Apart from the main character, the game includes a party of supporting characters. These characters can also be controlled by the player in combat situations, though the player cannot make decisions for them in non-combat situations.

7.1 Humans

Humans are the most numerous race in the Dragon Age universe. Just like in *The Witcher 3*, humans are a culturally diverse race, with many different nations, each with their own customs and traditions. This is also reflected in their speech, as their accent varies from one individual to the next. Humans also belong to every one of the seven categories.

7.2 Elves

Elves are a humanoid race that used to be the dominant race in the Dragon Age universe. However, after many wars and generations of slavery, they lost their position of power. Now, they are split into two factions – the Dalish, who live in nature, fighting humans and trying to keep the Elven culture alive, and city Elves who live among humans as a group of discriminated outcasts. This is very similar to the story of *The Witcher* Elves. Just like *The Witcher* Elves, *Dragon Age* Elves also use words from their ancient language, such as *shem* ‘human’, even while speaking the common tongue. However, the Dalish Elves use Elven words much more than the city Elves, reflecting the fact that they are trying to preserve their culture. Despite this difference, both the Dalish and the city Elves speak with a General American accent. The table illustrates some General American features in their speech.

| Feature | Example |
|------------|--|
| Rhoticity | “I found these... humans lurking [ˈlɜrkɪŋ] in the bushes” (DanaDuchy 2014a, 0:55). |
| T-flapping | “You shemlen are pathetic [pəˈθɛrɪk]” (DanaDuchy 2014a, 1:03). |

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| <i>Bath</i> vowel as [æ] | “I can’t [kænt] believe this” (DanaDuchy 2014a, 3:16). |
|--------------------------|--|

This is quite an unconventional decision by Bioware, as Elves are most often depicted speaking either RP or with an Irish/Welsh accent. However, as the next section illustrates, Dwarves also speak with a General American accent in *DA:O*. There could be two possible reasons for this. The first theory is that Bioware intentionally wanted to avoid the stereotype of Scottish Dwarves and British Elves, and instead wanted the player to judge the individual characters based on their personality and actions, not at first glance based on their race and accent. This is achieved by using General American, which, according to Bratteli (2011:20) is the most neutral variety. The second theory is much simpler and a bit more pessimistic. Since Bioware is a Canadian company, making games for a primarily American market, hiring American voice actors to do most of the voice work is simply easier than trying to find voice actors for many different varieties. When it comes to character roles, Elves can be found in every one of the seven categories, which is a refreshing change from *The Witcher 3*. There is even an Elven love interest and member of the main character’s party - Zevran Arainai. What is interesting about Zevran is that he does not speak with a GA accent, but rather with a Mediterranean (Spanish/Italian) accent, which is evident from prosodic features, as well as the features illustrated in the table below:

| Feature | Example |
|------------------------------------|--|
| monophthongization of [oʊ] to [o:] | “...I was all ribs and bone [bo:n] and didn’t know [no:] the pommel of a dagger from the pointy end” (DanaDuchy 2011, 0:34). |
| Alveolar trill | “The Crows [krəʊz] who are [ɑr] actually good enough to survive [sər ^l vaɪv] come to enjoy some of the benefits” (DanaDuchy 2011, 1:00) |
| Th-stopping | “To be truthful [^l trʊtfəl], I didn’t even know the [də] Crows existed when I joined them” (DanaDuchy 2011, 0:25) |

This is because Zevran grew up in the nation of Antiva, which is the *Dragon Age* equivalent of Venice. So, even though he is an Elf, he adopted the accent of the country he lives in, unlike *The Witcher* Elves, who always speak the same, no matter where they live. In conclusion, *Dragon Age* Elves use a very neutral variety (GA), and they may even use a different variety based on their geographic location. They also showcase a wider variety of character traits, and belong to more character categories. By taking this approach, Bioware does not reinforce stereotypes about speakers of a certain variety.

7.3 Dwarves

Dwarves are a humanoid race, shorter and stockier compared to Humans and Elves. Physically, they look very stereotypically Dwarven, with their long, braided beards and hair. They also possess some of the typical Dwarven character traits - they are very stubborn, traditional and straightforward, and the most prominent Dwarven character in the game is an exceptionally heavy drinker. The section on *The Witcher* Dwarves explains how these traits are often connected to the Scottish people. However, *Dragon Age* Dwarves do not speak with a Scottish accent. Just like the Elves, they use the General American variety. The table showcases GA features in the speech of a Dwarven party member, Oghren.

| Feature | Example |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Rhoticity | “That’s me, Mister Charm [ʃɑrm]” (Grodus92 2010, 0:25). |
| T-flapping | “It’s been fun, Felsi, but I’d better [ˈbɛrər] go” (Grodus92 2010, 3:37) |
| <i>Bath</i> vowel as [æ] | “Oh, you can’t [kænt] keep the Archdemon waiting” (Grodus92 2010, 3:46). |
| Use of <i>gotta</i> and <i>gonna</i> | “I’m gonna go talk to her. Look, you gotta back me up here, got it?” (Grodus92 2010, 0:05) |

Apart from their ‘Scottish’ traits, one notable thing about the Dwarven society is that it has very strict social hierarchy based on the caste system. This is reminiscent of the caste system in India and some other Asian countries. It seems that Bioware tried to incorporate multiple influences in creating their Dwarves, instead of making them a bad stereotype of one real world nation.

Dragon Age Dwarves also take on a bigger number of roles than *The Witcher* Dwarves. They can fulfill every character role in the game, except the role of a romantic interest.

7.4 Qunari

The Qunari are a race of white-haired, metallic-skinned, militaristic humanoids. Unlike Dwarves and Elves, they are a race unique to the *Dragon Age* setting. The primary focus of their culture is on duty and social responsibility. Theirs is a very rigid and pragmatic society, with every member of the society playing a highly specialized role. There is no consensus on the inspiration behind the Qunari. Bioware never gave an official statement but common theories include Medieval Islam, Ancient Rome/Sparta or Japan. Qunari speak their own language called Qunlat, and very few Qunari speak Common. There is only one Qunari in the *Dragon Age: Origins* game. His name is Sten, and the player can recruit him into their party. He thus fulfills the role of a friendly NPC, and him being the only Qunari in the game, that is the only role available for Qunari in *Dragon Age: Origins*. For Sten to be in the party, he has to be able to communicate with others, which is probably why Sten speaks Common. Despite the fact that very few Qunari speak Common, Bioware did not give Sten an exotic accent, nor did they make him speak ‘broken’ English, or English with many foreign expressions. This way, they avoided the possible negative stereotypes connected to real-world peoples, especially considering that Qunari are a militaristic —even savage — nation. Similarly to the Elves and Dwarves, Sten uses a very neutral variety. However, his speech does not have as many prominent American features. In fact, there are no features in his speech that undoubtedly point to a regional variety of English. His accent can be described as a synthesized, artificial variety, created for the purpose of the game. This table illustrates some of the features in his speech:

| Feature | Example |
|---------------|---|
| Non-rhoticity | “Nothing grew there except the bitter memory of gardens [ˈgɑːdnz]” (DanaDuchy 2014b, 4:35). |

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| No T-flapping | “Can you have just a little [ˈlɪtl] drowning? (DanaDuchy 2014b, 0:51). |
| <i>Bath</i> vowel as [æ] | “It is your task [tæsk] to fight the Archdemon, isn’t it?” (DanaDuchy 2014b, 7:10). |

The reason behind this decision for the only Qunari character to speak an even more neutral variety than the Elves and Dwarves could be that Bioware did not want to associate some of the more negative Qunari characteristics with non-standard or marked varieties.

8 Warhammer: Vermintide

Warhammer: Vermintide is a game series developed and published by Fatshark studio, and it is a bit different from the previous two games. It does not belong to the RPG genre, rather, it is a multiplayer co-op game series. This means that the player controls one of the five available characters and joins up with other players who do the same, in order to defeat a level together. The focus of the games is not on making choices that affect the narrative, but rather on defeating enemies and surviving. However, this does not mean that the characters are any less fleshed out. Quite the opposite – because the *Warhammer: Vermintide* games have a much lower number of characters than the typical RPG, the creators are able to put more time and effort into fleshing out each one of them. Each of the five playable characters has a very distinct personality and — what is important for this paper — a very distinct way of speaking. Since *Warhammer: Vermintide* games are not role-playing games, there are fewer opportunities for character interaction. The main source of characterization are voice lines that are triggered upon certain events, such as killing an enemy, being low on health, triggering a boss fight, etc. In addition to the five main characters, character roles that appear in the games are two authority figures, and various types of enemies. The *Warhammer: Vermintide* games are a part of a larger fantasy universe that was established by Games Workshop as a setting for tabletop games. They gave Fatshark the rights to use their setting in order to create games, which means that while Fatshark is not responsible for creating the possible negative stereotyping in their games, they can be held responsible for reinforcing them. The *Warhammer* fantasy universe is famous for its many provinces and factions, which are all based on real world factions during various historical periods. For example, The Empire is clearly based on the Holy Roman Empire in its prime. The

Warhammer setting usually does not take itself too seriously and it even often uses subversion of fantasy tropes, essentially being somewhat of a parody. However, the problems appear when it comes to monster factions such as Orcs, who are described as killing machines that care only about battle and conquest, all while visually being clear representations of Western African shamanism, as can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1: 6th edition Savage Orc Great Shaman



Language also plays a role in this. Each one of the different provinces has a very distinct accent, which remains consistent throughout the great number of *Warhammer* games and other content. For example, Bretonnians, who are based on the medieval French, always speak in a very strong — almost mocking — French accent, with guttural R sounds and French intonation and rhythm.

Since *Warhammer: Vermintide* features such a small number of characters, each with their own way of speaking, it will be easy to see which character traits are associated with which variety in the *Warhammer* universe, and if Fatshark tried to move away from negative stereotyping of non-standard varieties that the *Warhammer* universe is often criticized for.

8.1 Humans

What is interesting right from the start is that both authority figures in the games are human - Franz Lohner the quest giver, and Olesya the Wizard, both of which serve as a source of information to the main character, and by extension, to the players. In addition to them, two of the main characters are human as well - Viktor the Witch Hunter and Kruber the Mercenary. Each of one the humans uses a different variety, which is consistent with both *The Witcher* and *Dragon Age*. In a game with such a small number of characters like *Warhammer: Vermintide 1* and *2*, it is even more important for every character to be very unique, so that each type of player can find something they like.

8.2 Elf

There is one Elven character in the *Warhammer: Vermintide* games - Kerillian, the Wood Elven Waywatcher. Kerillian is a hero, a main character, usable by the player. Kerillian has a very strong personality. She sees herself as superior to humans, whom she mockingly calls ‘mayflies’, alluding to their short lifespan. When she is injured in the game, her voice lines will often include insults directed to other characters, and by extension, other players. All in all, she is not painted as a very positive character, despite being one of the main characters. Her strong personality is paired with an equally strong Scottish accent. Though her voice actress is British, she confirmed on her Twitter that she was doing a Scottish accent for Kerillian: “Scottish ;) and occasionally I do take a few artistic liberties with it and she’s an elf... from an imaginary place... in an undefined world... so, ya know, artistic license etc :) x” (Regan 2018). The table illustrates Kerillian’s Scottish features:

| Feature | Example |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Rhoticity with alveolar trill | “My blade sings greetings [ˈgriːtɪnz]!” (Lumeuu 2020, 0:28). |

| | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Monophthongization | “One step closer [ˈklo:sə]” (Lumeuu 2020, 0:05). |
| Word-final /ɪŋ/ realized as [ɪn] | “My blade sings greetings [ˈgri:tɪnz]!” (Lumeuu 2020, 0:28). |

Having a British voice actress intentionally use a different variety than her own points to language ideology playing a part in choosing how Kerillian will sound. In fantasy genre, Scottish is usually used for Dwarves, as is the case in *The Witcher 3*. However, Kerillian also possesses a number of those stereotypically Scottish traits - she is very feisty, stubborn, and straightforward, as well as able to hold her liquor. The more concerning part is her being portrayed as the most antagonistic of all main characters, which results in many players disliking her. This dislike, unfortunately, extends to her accent as well, with potential negative consequences for real-world speakers of Scottish English.

8.3 Dwarf

There is one Dwarf character in the *Warhammer: Vermintide* games - Bardin Goreksson the Dwarf Ranger. Bardin, like most Dwarves in the *Warhammer* setting, possesses qualities such as pride, stubbornness, and business acumen, and his love of a good battle rivals his love for good ale. There is an overlap here with Elven qualities, the main difference being that Dwarves are much more down to earth, and are not portrayed as being nearly as arrogant as Elves. This also means that Bardin is portrayed much more positively than Kerillian - he is fun and friendly towards other characters (and players), more of a ‘funny drunk’ type, which is consistent with both *The Witcher 3* and *Dragon Age: Origins* Dwarves. Traditionally, *Warhammer* Dwarves use the Yorkshire English variety. Forum user BaronRodney confirms this: “As a Yorkshireman I can confirm Warhammer Dwarfs are one of us. When you think of a gruff, stubborn ex-miner with a penchant for home brew talking about how shoddily things are made now, then you’re more Barnsley than Glasgow” (2018). However, Bardin’s speech does not have any strong Yorkshire features. First of all, his voice actor is Scottish, but he does not use his native variety, probably because Scottish English is already used by Kerillian. Instead, Bardin uses more of a neutral, synthesized Northern English variety. The table showcases some features of his speech:

| Feature | Example |
|---|---|
| Non-rhoticity | “Has to be the wizard’s tower [ˈtɑʊə] - I can’t see the door [dɔː]!” (Lumeuu 2019, 4: 45) |
| Monophthongization | “And the food goes [goːz] into the wagon” (Lumeuu 2019, 0:57). |
| Regional or colloquial lexeme varieties | “Haven’t seen one since cousin Okri split one in <i>twain</i> ” (Lumeuu 2019, 1:37). “Either pull me up, or funnel ale down <i>me gob!</i> ” (Lumeuu 2019: 1: 45). |
| <i>Bath</i> vowel as [ɑː] | “Has to be the wizard’s tower - I can’t [kɑːnt] see the door!” (Lumeuu 2019, 4: 45). |

There is a possibility that Bardin uses a more neutral variety because he possesses more positive qualities than, for example, Kerillian, whose accent is much stronger. On the other hand, it might just be the result of external circumstances, for example, the voice actor simply not being as good at emulating a Yorkshire accent. No official statements have been issued by Fatshark nor the voice actor.

8.4 Skaven

The Skaven are a race unique to the *Warhammer* setting. They are an evil race of rat-like humanoids that live in an underground sewer empire. In the *Warhammer: Vermintide* games, they fulfill solely the role of villains. In fact, the primary goal of the games is to kill Skaven and thwart their plans. The most prominent feature of Skaven speech is reduplication - uttering the same word twice in a row. Sometimes they also use a synonym of the first word, for example, ‘fight-kill’ or ‘pay-suffer’. Reduplication is the most distinctive feature of a real-world English variety - Singapore English. In addition to reduplication, Skaven sometimes do not mark tense. For example: “You-you! Not try hard enough!” (micspamchannel l 2018, 0:12), instead of “You’re not trying hard enough”. Having a race that is all evil is problematic in itself, but having

them speak a non-standard variety of English reinforces the standard language ideology and can strengthen negative stereotypes about Singapore English and its speakers.

9 Discussion

All three games in my analysis take a different approach to assigning varieties of English to members of fictional races. *The Witcher 3* prides itself on its deconstruction of fantasy tropes and focus on Slavic fairy tales and mythology, but their Elves and Dwarves sound very stereotypically British and Scottish, respectively. *The Witcher 3* makes heavy use of language ideologies for characterization. For example, the Elves' use of Celtic expressions alludes to their savage nature, while their use of RP is connected to their elegance, Old World prestige, and their more villainous traits. Dwarves, on the other hand, are portrayed as friendlier than Elves, but their use of Scottish English reinforces negative stereotypes about Scots as drunkards and cheapskates. In *The Witcher 3*, non-human races are also pushed into background roles. Notably, there are no Elven or Dwarven heroes, love interests or authority figures. This also reinforces the belief that standard varieties are more socially prestigious and attractive. *Dragon Age: Origins* takes a completely different approach - having their non-human races speak very neutral varieties allows Bioware to flesh them out through other means. This also allows Bioware to have members of the same fantasy race speak different varieties, just like humans do, subverting the trope that all members of a fantasy race must be very similar to each other. When all members of a fictional race speak the same variety, and they also all have very similar character traits, it makes their way of speaking a part of their identity, and not just the result of outside influence such as geographic location. This can result in a very harmful belief that all speakers of a real-world variety must also possess the same character traits. All evidence points to Bioware deliberately trying to avoid standard language ideology in their game. Additionally, Bioware puts non-human races into all character roles, which further proves their emphasis on diversity and equality. Finally, *Warhammer: Vermintide* games are the biggest offender when it comes to standard language ideology. The whole *Warhammer* setting has an unfortunate history of using non-white real world peoples as inspiration for their villainous or straight-up monstrous factions. According to my analysis, Fatshark does not try to fight against this. They heavily use language ideologies to characterize their heroes, in a way similar to *The Witcher 3*. Even worse, a race that

fulfills solely the role of villains in their games speaks the variety of English that is the farthest from the standard. The decision to rely so heavily on language ideologies for characterization could possibly stem from the fact that the *Warhammer: Vermintide* games offer fewer opportunities for character interactions than role-playing games do, but it is still a cheap shortcut to quickly convey character traits without having to go through the trouble of establishing them through complex expositional narrative. One thing is consistent throughout all three games — when a race uses more ‘foreign’ expressions (i.e. not belonging to a common language that different races use to communicate with each other in that specific fantasy universe), they are more prone to violence and conflict with other races. This is most likely due to the fact that using one’s own language is often seen as a symbol of national pride. However, many immigrant English speakers today are not able to use their own language in public without being seen as dangerous as soon they use expressions not belonging to the standard of the country. Fantasy writers, including game studios, need to be more aware of this and not rely on this trope as much. As a final note, all of these observations do not mean that any of these games is worse than the others, but it is possible to both enjoy something and criticize it. Language ideologies are not something many game studios and videogame consumers are aware of, and the purpose of this analysis is to draw attention to them and their potentially harmful consequences.

10 Conclusion

To sum up, the role of the media in spreading language ideologies must not be ignored, and videogames are no exception to this. Because videogames offer a highly immersive experience, videogame consumers are not as aware of the fact that fantasy videogames make use of language ideologies to quickly establish character traits of various fantasy races. In giving videogame characters a voice, creators and voice actors take inspiration from real world stereotypes, or from established fantasy tropes that stem from Tolkien. Such shortcuts in establishing characters can be harmful to real-world speakers of those varieties, by reinforcing existing stereotypes or even creating new ones. However, my analysis proves that at least some game studios try to avoid the use of language ideologies. One way to avoid them is to assign neutral varieties to fantasy races, and instead establish individual characters through other narrative means, as is done by Bioware in *Dragon Age: Origins*.

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