

Elves as Strangers in Video Games

Anita Albæk Simonsen

University of Copenhagen

lhq326@alumni.ku.dk

Marco Scirea

University of Southern Denmark

msc@mumi.sdu.dk

Eva Rask Knudsen

University of Copenhagen

erask@hum.ku.dk

ABSTRACT

Elves are constructed as a racial minority in many fantasy role-playing games (RPGs): they are usually rendered as ‘others’ that experience racism from humans or other humanoids in a constructed fantasy world. The players witness this racism or learn about it by discovering and familiarizing themselves with the setting of the RPG. As with literature and other types of media, video games are cultural artefacts, i.e. they enter a cultural context which has shaped them and which they in turn shape. Game developers of fantasy RPGs containing elves have made the decision to portray them as ‘strangers’, as nonhuman and to some extent non-familiar. Elves experience racism that mirrors what non-white peoples suffer. They also face similar issues and struggles as that of (post)colonised peoples; some RPGs construct conflicts that resemble those that are known from the aftermath of colonial discourse. Elves could easily be created as a thriving people, a people who had not had their culture taken from them by enslavement by humans or who would not face getting killed off by a mob if they decided to settle outside of ghettos. Why have the game developers chosen this way? When experiencing racism “first-hand” by playing an elven character – as is an option in the fantasy RPG *Dragon age: Origins* – it is possible for the player to engage with and maybe even re-evaluate the conflicts and struggles that are either colonial or postcolonial in nature. This re-evaluation could carry over from the fantasy world into the real world of the player, who might come to understand (post)colonised non-white peoples better. By viewing games as texts, we can assume that the act of reading a book is similar to the act of playing a game, and so playing a game would cause a ‘rereading of the world’ as theorised by Paulo Freire: “[t]he act of reading cannot be explained as merely reading words since every act of reading words implies a previous reading of the world and a subsequent rereading of the world.” [2]. The notion of a ‘stranger’ is attributed to Sara Ahmed: “Through strange encounters, the figure of the ‘stranger’ is produced, not as that which we fail to recognise, but as that which we have already recognised as ‘a stranger’” [1, p. 3]. The colonial binary opposition between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is sustained by the construction of the fantasy world, wherein elves are represented as strangers. As elves do function as a sort of stand-in for non-white peoples, portraying them as strangers

Atti della Digital Games Research Association Italia

DiGRA Italia 2019 *Sub Specie Ludi* 11 Ottobre, Università di Torino

© The text of this work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution --- NonCommercial --- NonDerivative 2.5 License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/>).

perpetuate that what is not white is 'strangeness'. This portrayal occurs due to the choices made by the game developers, who create the game within the cultural context that is built upon the remnants and effects of colonial discourses. In addition to this, my contention is that creators of games must find ways of constructing these encounters between familiar and non-familiar in a different way, "so that they are no longer hold other others in place" [1, p. 17], but instead contribute to representing non-white peoples as anything other than merely strange or non-familiar.

REFERENCES

[1] Sara Ahmed. *Strange encounters: Embodied others in post-coloniality*. Routledge, 2013.

[2] Paulo Freire. Reading the world and reading the word: An interview with paulo freire. *Language arts*, 62(1):15–21, 1985.