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"Elves are Jews with Pointy Ears and Gay Magic": White Nationalist Readings of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*

by Kristian A. Bjørkelo

Abstract

This paper explores White Nationalist interpretations of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011) through the concepts of *encoding-decoding* (Hall 1973) and *affordances* (Gibson 1977), using the White Nationalist forum Stormfront as case. The paper shows how *Skyrim* has become a cherished game by the forum's community as forum users find themselves represented by the Stormcloak rebellion fighting against the multiculturalism of the Septim Empire and a free "Skyrim for the Nords". On Stormfront the forum users discuss how their nationalist struggle in the real world resembles that of the fictional Stormcloaks, and how the issues they believe they face in society are mirrored in the struggles in *Skyrim*. In particular they find the racial and ethnic tensions in the game world parallel to their own ideology of conflict. The article explores the fluidity of traditional schemes of decoding texts, as the players on Stormfront debate the intentions and positions of the game developers, while the open world nature of the game may encourage their preferred, racialized interpretations.

Keywords: *Skyrim*, White Nationalism, White Supremacy, Racism, Affordances, Encoding-Decoding, Open World, RPG, Forum study, Stormfront, antisemitism

Introduction

On the gaming subforum of the White Nationalist website Stormfront members of the community discuss the games they love, hate, and that reflect their worldview. These discussions show a perspective on games and gaming culture that is influenced by White Nationalist ideas of racialized power structures, and which can form pockets of resistance against what they consider oppression of themselves. One of the games that has garnered most attention on the forum is *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios 2011). *Skyrim* remains a popular game years after its release. This can be attributed to the game being an open world sandbox with virtually endless possibilities for modification and individual stories to be told. There's also the possibility of political, and even controversial, readings of the world of *Skyrim* and its stories. This article attempts to show how *Skyrim* is interpreted as a political game by White Nationalists. How do they play *Skyrim*? How do they justify the game from their political perspective? Using the concepts of encoding and decoding (Hall 1973) and affordances (Gibson 1977), I will shed light on this subject in this article.

Background

The article is born out of an increased interest in how games and gaming culture can fit into this political spectrum. The conflict sparked by #Gamergate and the ensuing discussions showed that games and gaming culture are not exempt from being considered political (Mortensen 2016, Massanari 2015). And while #Gamergate was a

flashpoint of contemporary interest in games and politics, it is far from a new subject. Whether we are talking overtly propagandic games such as *Special Force* (Hezbollah 2003) or *America's Army* (United States Army 2002), or games dealing with explicitly moral and political topics such as *This War of Mine* (11 bit studios 2014), *Bioshock* (2K Boston & 2K Australia 2007) or *SpecOps: The Line* (Yager Development 2012), games have always dealt with the political, and the discourse about games is political. There are also several examples of games made by White Nationalists for the consumption by White Nationalists (Selepak 2010), and some have argued that games and gaming culture, alongside the Internet, are contributing parts of the racial, and racist, discourse, especially in the United States (Daniels 2012, Daniels and LaLune 2012, Hawley 2017).

When dealing with racism, White Supremacy and the extreme right, game studies have mostly focused on games as text and purveyors of racism. Such is the case with David Leonard's articles (2003, 2006, 2009) on *Grand Theft Auto* arguing that the series provides presumed *white* players with an opportunity for Ghetto Tourism and that the series promotes White Supremacy and reinforce state authority and violence against minorities. Others, such as Andrew Selepak (2010) have focused on racist games and mods that are produced, distributed and, we assume, enjoyed by White Nationalists. Jessie Daniels and Nick Lalone (2012) compare the games made by and for the far right with mainstream games and media expressions, in the context of online culture. The argument is that games like *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North 2015) or *Saint's Row* (Volition 2006) portray race in ways that lend themselves to racist interpretations, even when with comedic or satiric intent. They "are a primarily white interpretation of African American culture for white people to play" (Daniels and LaLune 2012, 13). These analyses are paralleled by studies of representation and racism in online games such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) with its background in primarily European, and thus white, fantasy (Higgin 2009, Ritter 2010). What all these have in common, is their focus on textual analysis of games, and with few exceptions exclude the interpretations by the target audience themselves, whether the game is made by the extreme right or are mainstream titles. Contrary to this approach, the main concern of this article is how *Skyrim* is interpreted by White Nationalist players. To be able to respond to White Nationalist discourses, it is important that we understand how self-described White Nationalists relate to, interpret and appropriate mainstream popular culture. In his analysis of a fascist interpretation of the *Judge Dredd* comic books (Barker 1997), Martin Barker shows how a fan finds justification and affirmation of his self-ascribed fascism in the comic books, in spite of the fact that it can more easily be read as anti-authoritarian and anti-fascist satire. While the Judge Dredd character is presented as a rabid authoritarian serving as judge, jury and executioner in a dystopian police state, Barker's informant sees of the work as a strong man and a strong society dishing out justice to those who transgress, reaffirming his belief in just and efficient fascism. Likewise, as this paper shows, White Nationalists can and will interpret a game in light of their own beliefs, depending on how easily the game affords this interpretation.

What meaning does White Nationalists make out of *Skyrim*? This paper parallels Richard King and David Leonard's (2014) analysis of Stormfront users' relationship to gaming and its racial aspects, finding that they enjoy playing empowered white people and narratives that reinforce their worldview. Like this article, King and Leonard's analysis is based on Stormfront users' own postings about the game, providing insights into the White Nationalist movement and how they consume popular culture. This gives a valuable insight into how players will interpret a game and its affordances differently, contingent on their life world, ideology, past experiences and current situations. The strength of both these approaches is its focus on player experiences with games, is that they provide much of the nuances in available interpretations, that may be missed in a primarily textual analysis. This paper aims to catch some of these same nuances.

Alongside Barker (1997) and King & Leonard (2014), this paper demonstrates that creators of media products have little control over

who uses their product, and why, or how they perceive the product. Stuart Hall (1973) proposed an influential model of encoding and decoding media content, where the audience could decode from three different positions. Adrienne Shaw (2017) has shown how well this intersects and merges with James Gibson's (1977) concept of how technology *affords* different uses. Important for both these approaches is that interpretation and uses of media products are *negotiated*; they are not determined by the producer. The cultural studies tradition of Hall has always focused on the power dynamics involved in encoding and decoding, putting the audience in the position of the decoder whose power derives from producing meaning and interpretation. Nowhere is the political aspects of popular culture and its reading more apparent than in the political fringe, where truly everything is political. Such is the case with the White Nationalists on *Stormfront*, where they often discuss current events and popular entertainment. In this article I conduct a textual and discourse analysis of how they discuss *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda 2011), and the ethnic conflicts and representations in that game through the lens of White Nationalist ideology.

White Nationalism

White Nationalist (WN) is a blanket term for the ideology of groups and people who support either White Supremacy or White Segregationism (SPLC 2018, Zeskind 2009). This is usually coupled with racism and antisemitism; there are exceptions, but the term is often used to disguise racism and Nazism as a more benevolent and marketable nationalism or right-wing identity politics. The term covers groups like Ku-Klux Klan, different Nazi orientations and more. White Nationalism springs out of a particular American context, where skin colour stands in for race and ethnicity, and has later spread to other parts of the world. White Nationalism is a fluid term encompassing much of the racist far right, now also referred to as the somewhat less incendiary alt right (Hawley 2017, Swain 2002, SPLC 2018). The Stormfront community refers to themselves as White Nationalists, and I will maintain this moniker in this article.

It is a common stance among White Nationalists on Stormfront that the term "racist" is used to persecute those who want their people and nation to be free of "outside influence". They will say that they don't hate other people; they only love their own. In this perspective, they are not on a mission to oppress or exterminate other races, but to liberate the "white race", and prevent its extermination at the hands of the Jews and other forces moving in on their nations. The Jews are in a particular position in this ideology, and antisemitism is a particular form of racism that has been an important part of extremist ideologies. Antisemitism predates the rise of fascism and nationalism, and posits that Jews are an insidious force that conspire to undermine the societies that allow them to settle (Cohn 1967). Antisemitism portrays Jews as both perverted subhumans and as powerful and intelligent manipulators. The classic example of this being *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a fabricated work that lays the blame for virtually everything on the Jews. Despite having been discredited time and time again, the *Protocols* are still used as an argument by anti-Semites today (Cohn 1967). In White Nationalist circles one finds the term ZOG, or Zionist Occupation Government, that expresses much of the same idea: That Jews are the ones that are really in control. They will point out members of the media and corporations that are Jewish, to prove their power and influence. In this worldview, there is nothing more insidious and dangerous than the Jews. Whatever bad happens in the world, the Jews are involved (Berlet 2004). ZOG and their control of mainstream media discourse is important, because it hides the "truth" from people, and it is a common belief among White Nationalists on Stormfront that the truth is hidden from most people, that anyone would be a White Nationalist if they only knew the truth. According to White Nationalists, "ordinary people" need an ontological shock to see through the conspiracies and lies, to understand what is good for them. This is a recurring theme on Stormfront and it also becomes a part of the White Nationalist discourse on *Skyrim*.

The White Nationalist movement appears to have had an upsurge in the 2010s, and perhaps culminating in the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville in 2017 (ADL 2019), but even though there has been strong backlash to this, parts of the movement seems emboldened. And as modern White Nationalism seems intrinsically tied to the web, so is gaming culture, and we could see the two intermingle during #GamerGate. And in 2019, Branton Tarrant used gaming references as part of his anti-muslim terrorist attack in Christchurch, New Zealand (Bjørkelo 2019).

Skyrim: Land of the Nords

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim is currently the latest single player computer role playing game in the very popular Elder Scrolls series. With some exceptions, *The Elder Scrolls* is a series of first-person role playing games set in a fantasy world, in which one creates a player character (PC) from one of several available cultures or races, such as the cat-like Khajit, the reptilian Argonians, Orcs, and different elven and human nationalities. They all have their special traits and abilities, and the world's different cultures are filled with prejudice between the different groups. The PC travels through an open world, and the player can chose to follow the main questline, or go off the rail and do side quests and explore the world as they see fit, developing the PC's skills as a crafter, warrior, rogue, mage, and more. In these explorations the PC will encounter thousands of monsters and non-player characters (NPC) in a simulation of a living world. The game even allows the PC making a living being a crafter or trader, get married and set up a home themselves.

The *Elder Scrolls* games are filled with several lines of conflicts; religious, political and ethno-nationalist. The different groups have long histories of conflicts and fertile ground for hate and prejudice. These ethno-nationalist tensions come to the fore in *Skyrim*, where a group of nationalists called Stormcloaks seek independence from the Empire and the freedom to worship their old Gods.

The people of Skyrim are humans called Nords; they are tall, muscular, with blonde hair and blue eyes, and Scandinavian sounding names, like Ragnar, Thorald, Sissel, Sigrid, and so on. Their architecture is reminiscent of the historical Norse building style, and they are an honour-based society that value strength and steel. Everything is designed to represent Viking culture. The central plot revolves around the return of dragons and the Stormcloak rebellion against the Imperials. The player must defeat several dragons to progress the plot. The player can choose to ignore the rebellion, or join forces with either the cosmopolitan, multi-cultural and multi-ethnic Empire or the nationalist and xenophobic Stormcloaks.

It is not a far reach for the White Nationalists to identify themselves with the Stormcloaks and the Nords, or their struggle against the Septim Empire -- a multicultural institution, that unite people of all races and creeds. This struggle is referenced in several places in the game, such as the *Age of Oppression*, song by Stormcloak friendly bards in the game (The Elder Scrolls Wiki, a). The song salutes Ulfric, the leader of the Stormcloaks, promising the imminent end of Imperial occupation. The words of the song like "With our blood and our steel we'll take back our home", is reminiscent of the Nationalist Socialist rhetoric of *Blut und Boden*, blood and soil, so popular among White Nationalists. The counter version to this, *Age of Aggression* heralds the death of Ulfric (The Elder Scrolls Wiki, b), and is song by those friendly to the Empire.

The land of Skyrim is portrayed as a contested space, as the Stormcloak rebellion and the ethnic conflict is frequently referenced and pressed upon the player by the NPCs in the game. Several dialogue trees and quests reference the conflict, and the roots of the conflict are ever present in the game's lore as found in books and conversations. It becomes the inescapable backdrop of the game, no matter how the player intends to play the game. The Nords are portrayed as a fiercely independent and traditionalist "race" of humans who appreciates strength and staying true to the Old Ways; they have grown to resent the rule of the Septim Empire and its laws repressing the traditions of the Nords. These rules have been imposed

upon the Empire after losing a war against the non-Elven alliance called the third Aldmeri Dominion, spearheaded by the shadowy Elven sect, Thalmor. This situation only makes the Nords resent the Aldmeri presence in Skyrim that much more, and the Thalmor becomes an easy enemy to make in the game.

This lore is visible in several quest lines involving the Nords, as well as the Stormcloak rebellion, and they appear designed to create sympathy for the Nord underdog and their struggle, but at the same time the Nord ethno-chauvinism and even racism are also clearly represented in these same quests and dialogue trees. As is the convention of open world role-playing games, it is left to the players how they wish to relate to the conflict; join the racist Nords or the oppressive Empire and the shadowy Thalmor, or choose to ignore or fight either side.

The game design not only allows the player to pursue a racist or ethno-nationalist agenda, it is even possible to argue that the player is pushed in that direction by the game. The player's sympathy for the freedom fighting Stormcloaks is primed already in the game's opening sequence when the PC is to be executed by the antagonistic Empire. The choice to follow the Stormcloaks once the execution is thwarted by a rampaging dragon seems the obvious choice, and the player is given directions to meet up with a Stormcloak contact. If the player instead decides to follow the Imperial questline at the beginning of the game they soon find themselves into higher level territory that is more dangerous and obviously not meant for low level players. The Stormcloaks, on the other hand, can be found in low level areas of the game, where the player is more capable of dealing with the encounters early on. This way the design pushes the player towards the Stormcloaks.

Although certain parts of the questline appear to invite the player to take sides with the Stormcloaks, other aspects of the game do not support a particular bias. As an open world game, the player can pursue their chosen goals and motivations, but the game design does not recognize the player's motivation for their actions. For instance, when the player decides to carry out criminal actions such as going on a killing spree, *Skyrim* does not discriminate between whether this killing spree is ethnically motivated or not. The consequence is the same as with any other illegal action -- a bounty, a fine or even jail time. This repercussion is dependent on the player being observed -- killing someone in the woods with no witnesses has little consequence. The game doesn't reward these actions, other than through increased experience points and loot; rather the game punishes such actions. While the game on a representative level is all about ethnic tensions, the simulation is "colour blind" and does not respond differently if the player exclusively kills characters of a certain race or faction. These racial and ethnic tensions are mainly found on the representational level, and not on the level of gameplay. In simpler terms, the game's simulation allows for killing everyone without discrimination, regardless of skin colour.

Authorial intent

We cannot say for certain what the creative team intended their message to be, but as a mainstream game marketed towards a broad audience and released by a major publisher,

we can be fairly certain that they did not intend for the game to be a White Nationalist propaganda tool. In 2017 Bethesda came under criticism on social media (Backe 2018a, 2018b) for their use of anti-Nazi slogans in promoting the latest instalment of *Wolfenstein*, *Wolfenstein II: The New Colossus* (MachineGames 2017) which they were the publishers of. In an interview with Game Industry, Pete Hines, VP of PR and Marketing, was adamant that the company was against Nazis:

"[...] We aren't going to shy away from what the game is about. We don't feel it's a reach for us to say Nazis are bad and un-American, and we're not worried about being on the right side of history here" (Hines in Batchelor 2017).

But he also insisted that the games they make are not consciously intended to comment current politics:

"[...] Bethesda doesn't develop games to make specific statements or incite political discussions. We make games that we think are fun, meaningful, and immersive for a mature audience" (Hines in Batchelor 2017).

As an open world role-playing game, *Skyrim* belongs to a genre that fosters the idea that a game should allow the player to explore any moral, as well as political, position within the game. This is one of the factors that makes discussion of the designers' intent difficult, or even a debatable point. *Skyrim* is a sandbox game, where players make their own meaning out of the game. But for some Stormfront users interested in what they believe is the "true" message of the game, the intentions of the designers and publishers become important. For this analysis, however, the assumed authorial intent serves as an anchor for positioning interpretations of the game.

Stormfront: Land of the White Nationalists

The Stormfront website originated in 1996, after having started as a bulletin-board system (BBS). Stormfront has had many functions and sub-pages over the years, but the core of it has always been a gathering place and resource for the extreme right wing, not just in the US, but the world (Bjørkelo 2012). Stormfront is not only a famous White Nationalist site with thousands of users, it is also open for all to see and read, and even has a section devoted to allow non-members to interact with the users and ask questions about the site and White Nationalism. The site has thousands of users every day. And is easily the largest and longest living discussion board for White Nationalists and the extreme right on the web (Daniels 2008, Daniels 2009, Bjørkelo 2012), and includes sub boards for different topics, such as gaming. Some of these subforums can arguably be considered communities in and by themselves in particular those dedicated to geographical areas (De Koster & Houtman 2008). Parts of Stormfront have been under academic scrutiny, like the Women's subforum (Castle & Chevalier 2011), and the gaming discussions were sourced by Richard King and David Leonard (2014).

Stormfront is headlined with a simple introduction, and links to a four part thread to introduce readers to Stormfront and "Pro White Nationalism", and this is mostly about the latter, and the Jews -- whom they blame for their predicaments. The variety of topics discussed in the open forums on Stormfront are pretty varied, from the "trivial" such as food, music and games, to the personal such as relationships and life experiences, and of course politics and current events, all analysed from the racialized perspective of a White Nationalist.

Discussions tend to boil down to how to be a "good white man" (and sometimes woman) and how a situation illustrates the problems of Jews, race mixing or multi-culturalism, or how White Nationalism is a solution. White Nationalism is a perspective to see the world through, and a tool for fixing it. The users of Stormfront tend to shy away from the most blatant racist terms and incitement to violence, but it is always there under a very thin veneer of respectable discourse.

The gaming sub section of Stormfront is active, but the activity is infrequent. A normal month will see about 4 or 5 new game-related threads, many of these will have only a couple or no comments, while others will have between 20 and 50 replies, some more -- such as those about popular games deemed relevant -- such as *Skyrim*. The discussions here cover a variety of games that are not particularly political or biased by White Nationalism. The gaming subforum is headlined with instructions that in order to post, the poster must sharpen their wits and perform 50 sit-ups and 20 push ups a day. This rule, if a bit tongue in cheek, cements stereotypes that the White Nationalist is a warrior in top physical condition, who does not engage in trivial activities such as play and games. This is how the forum users would like to see themselves. They predominantly play the same AAA games that "everyone else" plays, as there are very few made by and for White Nationalists, in spite of the increasing ease in

making simple games today. The classics of White Nationalist gaming are *Zog's Nightmare* (Ramm 2006) and *Ethnic Cleansing* (National Alliance 2002) and their sequels, and the more recent *Muslim Massacre* (Vaughn 2008), are discussed but not with frequency or activity level as *Skyrim* and other mainstream games.

On the Stormfront gaming subforum, the "what are you playing" thread is frequently bumped and has been going since 2012. Like with most of the threads, Stormfront game discussions are remarkably similar to discussions about games on other boards -- until references to race relations or European heritage are intermingled with the discussion. Users complain about non-white protagonists in games, while other games are lauded because the protagonist is white and shows some important part of white history or culture. Sometimes forum users discuss whether or not the producers are Jewish or Muslim. Some threads ask the simple question: Can a White Nationalist play this game in good conscience? The atmosphere of Stormfront's gaming subforum can be summed up in King and Leonard's words;

"As with other forms of popular culture, white nationalist consumption is rife with ambivalence and even disdain for what are seen as harmful influences. That is, mainstream games, those that reflect the values of a multicultural and morally corrupt America, have turned whites into zombies." (King and Leonard 2016, p. 112)

The main thread about *The Elder Scrolls V:Skyrim* on the Stormfront discussion board has more than 720 individual posts discussing the game. Additionally there are a dozen separate threads that discuss the game and the parallels between the game and the real world, as well as several mentions of the game in threads about other games -- such as *Far Cry 3* (Ubisoft Montreal 2012) and *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios 2008). Characteristic for discussions of *Skyrim* on Stormfront's gaming subforum is the idea that the game might help open people's eyes to the "truth" of White Nationalism. There is a question of whether or not the game can be used for propaganda or recruitment. The game, as certain forum users see it, allows for people to ask the right questions about nationalism, because of the struggle of the Nords, *Skyrim's* white Nordic people. It's a short step, according to one user, for anyone who "isn't an idiot", to start thinking in terms of the Nords protecting their homeland from invaders and outside influence, and then to think that this might be true for white people too. Stating that if the Nords can rally for the nation's freedom, why can't they do so in the real world? And while we cannot say that the game itself initiates these thoughts in those who are not already adherents to this vein of thinking, it is however something that can fuel the arguments of the White Nationalists who are trying to convince others.

Seeing how White Nationalists express justifications for playing different mainstream games, recommending them to each other and discuss the game's merits and flaws in light of their political positions on the Stormfront forum made me ponder how White Nationalist players decode games, and what position they take to mainstream media, and what affordances modern games provide White Nationalist players. In particular a popular game like *Skyrim*, with millions of players around the world, featuring a grand open, single player, fantasy world with an ethnically diverse cast of characters.

Data collection

For the research presented in this article, I searched for all mentions of *Skyrim* on the Stormfront website, which I gathered in a database coded according to the subject matter. For context I added posts from other forums where *Stormfront's* relationship to *Skyrim* has been discussed. This added up to 126 separate facsimiles of web pages in the database which formed the basis of my analysis.

The data collecting process reveals some of the ethical dilemmas involved in using online archives that date back in time, where data is publicly available, but informed consent is difficult or impossible to obtain, and the material is politically sensitive. The safest option,

unfortunately, is to *not* do the research or collect the data, or, as some have suggested, to anonymize and paraphrase to the extent of fabricating the data (Lüders 2015) to keep it ethically sound. I find the latter very problematic for reasons relating to research validity and reliability, but it is currently the standard approach of the national guidelines of research ethics in my country of employment (NESH 2014, 2018; NSD.no). Arguably, the pseudonymity of Stormfront forum use provides enough anonymity for its users, which theoretically enables far right extremists to speak more uninhibited (Carter and Kondor 2020), but pseudonymity is not equal to anonymity, and text on open forums are easily searched and found through search engines. I have also taken extra steps to ensure the anonymity and privacy of the specific users. The topic of White Nationalism is sensitive, and protecting the anonymity and privacy of the communities investigated is important, due to the potential of harm being done to any user identified (Carter and Kondor 2020); social, mental and physical.

While the identity of the forum is relevant, I have removed the user names and other identifying information, and have paraphrased comments in situations where they could be identified through a simple forum search. This is complicated, as it requires the paraphrasing or re-writing of violent, racist and antisemitic content, with the possibility that some of the meaning might get lost in the process. By anonymizing the individual participants in the discussion, but not the forum, I have chosen a more moderate path than national ethics guidelines require, arguing that the forum is a public space and the discussion of academic and public interest. I am aware that this approach does not make it impossible for someone to track down the specific discussions used, but I also believe that being open about sources is important, and allows for counter arguments to be made. Stormfront isn't just technically public; it seeks public attention in order to recruit, and has thousands of visitors every day both registered or not. And while this does not automatically available for free use by researchers, there is the additional consideration of the public good and interest. I believe that it is in the public interest to know about the activities on Stormfront to further our understanding and knowledge about the extreme right.

Encoding and Decoding of *Skyrim*

Central to Stuart Hall's theory of encoding and decoding is the idea that the interpretation -- or decoding -- of a message is not determined by the message and its origin alone, but by the specific context, knowledge, and perspectives of those on the receiving end. Encoding-decoding is according to Hall a complex process, where the dominant-hegemonic or preferred message is shaped by the cultural context and situation of the sender, and the receiver's interpretation of the message is equally shaped by cultural context and situation of the receiver (1973). Hall suggested three positions for decoding a text, and these positions have become "academic canon"; the dominant position that follows the "preferred meaning" of the sender; the negotiated position which "acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations, while, at a more restricted, situational level, it makes its own ground-rules, it operates with 'exceptions' to the rule" (Hall 1973, 17); finally, the oppositional position, where the message is decoded in a counter-hegemonic way opposite of the "preferred" or dominant position of the often corporate sender. These are far from rigid categories, and Hall understood them as suggested categories (Hall 1973), and any one person could, and probably does, shift between different modes of reading, depending on context and useful in the current situation. This fluidity of positioning towards the text is very visible in Stormfront's reading of *Skyrim*, and makes a rigid categorization difficult, if not impossible. It does however allow us to see how the Stormfront community appropriates the game for themselves, and acquires a sense of power over its message.

There's a power difference between the sender and the receiver that can be negotiated by how the receiver decodes it. Hall's model is one that empowers the audience, showing their ability to negotiate or even oppose hegemonic ideas and messages, and to adapt cultural

and media product to their own needs. And when the Stormfront community discusses *Skyrim* they do so in a way that favours their White Nationalist worldview. The Stormfront community decodes the play within their own cultural context, and within the framework of White Nationalism, but this process is not arbitrary. The decoding is always influenced by how the message was encoded, and not just the political and cultural context of that process, but also the technological context. Being an open-world role-playing game, *Skyrim* is bound by the genre conventions to allow the players freedom to roam and interact with the game world. The design itself is therefore intended to give the players freedom to interpret the world, as the Stormfront community has done. We can speak of this in terms of the game's *affordances*.

The Affordances of *Skyrim*

James Gibson (1977) introduced the concept of affordances as an important part of how we perceive objects and the world. Affordances are the properties of an object that allows us to interact with them. As such they can be understood as action possibilities or a set of potentials relating to what the object can be used for or mean for the people observing it. As psychologist and interaction researcher Donald Norman specifies, an affordance is something that happens in between the object and the user, and it is the aspects of both of these that make up the affordances (Norman 1988). This can be transferred to videogames, allowing us to think about what a game allows us to do, but also what meanings a game allows us to take from it and our actions within the game world. In its strictest sense, we speak of affordances in games as what aspects of the game are available for us to manipulate -- such as walls to climb or blow up, flowers or gear to pick up (Jørgensen 2013, 81-84), but we can also speak of it in a broader sense as game are texts that invite possible actions. As game scholar Adrienne Shaw points out, games are interactive technologies and we can use the concept of affordances to understand what "actions these texts invite and how players actually use them" (Shaw 2017, 597). She proposes a model that focuses on "the encoding/decoding of designed affordances to better account for power, resistance, and interactivity in digital media environments" (Shaw 2017, 593).

An open-world role-playing game can be described as a game that contains a vast multitude of possible actions (Majevski 2018). Such games are often valued on how much freedom they allow, and how many different actions you can engage in. As the player explores the world of *Skyrim*, they build the skills that they use the most, whether the player is oriented towards fighting with a variety of weapon types, magic of different types or crafting different useful objects. The player can even make a decent living working in a lumber mill. These are some of the many affordances of *Skyrim*; and by extension a player may interpret the games in the light of that activity being important to them.

In neither Hall's encoding-decoding model nor Norman's theory of affordances are the interpretations determined by the sender, but this does not mean that they are arbitrary. The interpretations and affordances are made available to the audience and user within the boundaries set up by design and the cultural hegemony. The user is free to play and interpret, restricted only by the object itself. When Stormfront forum users find a sense of belonging to the nationalist Stormcloak rebellion, this is because of the affordances in the game design. The Stormcloaks are designed not only to *be* ethnocentric, white, blonde nationalists, which is an ideal to real world White Nationalists playing the game, but also to *act* like their ideal White Nationalist warrior that discriminates and even commits acts of violence for their cause. Thus, the game world presents situations that allow for the interpretation that the Stormcloaks are like *themselves*. When the player chooses a side in the conflict, and starts acting for that side, the opposing factor becomes hostile and will attack the player character. The design allows the player to take sides in the conflict through their chosen actions. While the intention of this design can be called into question, this is secondary for the analysis, because what matters here is the interpretation by the players as they are the

chief negotiators of the game's meaning, and those who make use of its affordances. A game that allows the players to choose sides in an escalating national and ethnic conflict, creates affordances for different political actions and interpretations. This includes actions that are not necessarily intended or thought of by the designer. Such actions can in Hall's terms be considered an oppositional position or decoding; or in terms of affordances an *imagined affordance* (Shaw 2017). Imagined affordances are possible uses imagined by the user, but not intended by the designer (Nagy & Neff 2015, 5).

Although affordances are concerned with what a game allows the player to do in terms of gameplay, this is also closely related to how gameplay is represented. In *Skyrim*, this means that the player doesn't only witness ethnic conflict, but can also take part in it. The Nords are fighting a war to "liberate their Homeland" through violence. Beyond witnessing this struggle, the player can come across fights or prisoners of war being transported and choose to liberate them. And if the player chooses to join the Stormcloak's struggle by following their questline, they will lead the group to victory through several quests of conquest. The game design encourages this kind of engagement with the world; furthermore, it allows players who are so inclined to act out their own political and racist fantasies by killing of non-white or non-Nord NPCs in *Skyrim*. With the notable exception of children, the game allows the player to kill everyone, but the player can also choose to selectively kill only those who don't conform to their ideology -- and it is in this the imagined affordances lie. The ability to join a racist revolutionary movement is a designed affordance, but acting out being an actual White Nationalist depends on imagined affordances.

Playing the Nords

The discussions on Stormfront on *Skyrim* mainly focus on gameplay, starting with speculation as they eagerly await the game's release, and later more concrete discussions about the gameplay. In this section of the article, I explore these discussions, and how they reveal the White Nationalist readings of *Skyrim* and its affordances. The forum users aren't reading the gameplay as separated from White Nationalist ideology. Several users tell tales of how they go out of their way to kill coloured NPCs, or non-Nord NPCs, or Imperials, or Elves and other non-human characters. One user bluntly states that the NPCs get angry and try to kill him for attacking their chickens and "their blacks". They proudly display their in-game genocidal intent, of keeping Nord clear of foreign influences. It's unknown whether or not this is something they actually do in their game, or the telling of this is a performance of ideology and stance within a community where they know this will be lauded. This is Stormfront after all, and while this sub board focuses on games and the playing of games, the games and the activity are seen through the prism of the political perspectives of the players.

White Nationalism in the Land of Skyrim

Even though many of the Stormfront users discussing the game agree that there is a parallel to the real world in *Skyrim*, exactly *how* remains open for discussion. There are numerous posts trying to assign real world nationalities and ethnicities to the races and species available in *Skyrim*, arguing not just for physical similarities, but historical and cultural parallels. As any other fantasy work, *Skyrim* lends material from a mix of real-world history, so many such parallels can be found. It is clear that there isn't just one reading of *Skyrim* available to the members of Stormfront; it is rather a resource bank of possible interpretations and meanings (Fiske 1989). The members are able to decode the game from different positions.

In *Skyrim*, the Stormcloaks' struggle for independence and a racially pure Skyrim, a "Skyrim for the Nords", echo the Stormfront users' own calls for a monoethnic and monocultural society, without the influence of other races. Especially the Jews who in the traditional White Nationalist narrative are to blame for multiculturalism and the decline of white nations. The contributors on Stormfront's gaming forum predominantly discuss the game world of *Skyrim* in terms of race and ethnic conflicts. They feel they are well represented by the

blue-eyed blonde Nords in the game. One user says he cannot bring himself to murder innocent whites, but "as a White Nationalist, I play as a Nord, doing good and helping people by killing non-Nords and dark-skinned characters to the best of my abilities" (paraphrased by the author).

Even before the game was released, Stormfront users posted images of the people in the game, discussing what "real world race" the different characters resembled or emulated. There was some conflict here, as some felt that Nords were represented as too "negroid", but this doesn't seem to shift their allegiance away from them. The discussions show, however, how important race is to the White Nationalists of Stormfront, as they start making plans for how to play the game as true Nords.

The racist parallels made between *Skyrim* and the real world is perhaps never clearer than when one user suggests that the Thalmor Elves are "Jews with pointy ears and gay magic". This notion becomes an important part of understanding *Skyrim* as a White Nationalist narrative, to paraphrase one user: "I just realized how the Thalmor resemble Jews, and the Stormcloaks us", another stated, and that the game is shockingly similar to the real world as "the Thalmor (Jews), stand on the sidelines growing stronger while the Empire and Stormcloaks fight each other" (paraphrased by the author), spoiling the fact that also the Stormcloaks are being manipulated by the Thalmor Elves, but also underlining the perceived insidious nature of the Thalmor-Jews entity in both *Skyrim* and the White Nationalist worldview.

Some forum users also call out the xenophobic and prideful aspects of Nord culture, and the Stormcloaks as parallels to their own ideology. One user summarizes it easily; if the Khajit and Argonians can have their own native homeland, why can't the Nords? And why can't White Nationalists in the real world have their own nation? The user further states, with support from others, that the game could be used to open the eyes to the conditions of white people and to the need for White Nationalism. One would have to be a "moron" not to see this, he explains. Another user expresses surprise that the game so closely represents their own world view and ideological narrative, and some question whether this may have been the designers' intentions. Others point out that that the game's developer Bethesda obviously has not intended this interpretation (see below). Bethesda is even owned by a Jew, one user claims. To these users it becomes ironic that the game obviously caters to their ideological interpretation.

Rather than understanding the intentions of the developer, how the game can be played and interpreted is more important to most of the users. No matter the intention of the developers, the game is interpreted as close to the White Nationalist "reality". One user writes that they first thought people were reading too much into the game until he played it for himself and realized that the game was "frighteningly" close to his nationalist view of reality.

Assimilation or resistance

Stormfront users discuss the assumed intentions of the designers and publishers of the game, because they are interested in whether they intentionally created a White Nationalist game. This is important for the forum users, partly because some don't want to buy products by companies perceived as anti-white. There are those who are not willing to give the game a chance because of the assumed "Jewish ownership" of Zenimax, Bethesda's parent company, while others argue that the game is harbouring some secret pro-white agenda. One user suggests that there might be one or two White Nationalists working on the team. The majority however seems not to engage with Bethesda's intentions, and focuses on the text itself and the meaning of it.

Like Barker's (1997) fascist fan of Judge Dredd, the White Nationalists of *Skyrim* use the game to reaffirm their politics. As in the case of the youth in Devane and Squire's (2008) study, the players on Stormfront interpret, or decode, the game and game world in ways that fits their life world. This interpretation does not happen without resistance

though, as their relationship with mainstream culture is strained by their antagonism to society.

Nationalist Decoding of *Skyrim*

Using the Stuart Hall's suggested positions for decoding of a sandbox game where gameplay is exploratory and the producers' intentions for this reason are secondary creates a confusing schemata. If we consider Hall's original theory, we can argue that a hegemonic, preferred reading of the game that supports what we can call an established, accepted worldview would lead Stormfront users to reject the game as "multi-cultural" and "Jewish. However I find that the forum users express that the game design support their worldview. This is particularly true when focusing on the Nords and the Stormcloak quests; here they find affordances in the game design that can be interpreted to support a White Nationalist worldview. The affordances of open world games bring to the fore the difficulty of categorizing the readers' positions in decoding a text, emphasizing its fluidity.

When *Skyrim* is a parallel to our real world for Stormfront, it appears as an idealized version of it. It is a world where *Skyrim* can truly be for the Nords, and where they have the chance to actually be the masters of their own white domain. In *Skyrim* they are not only the true heroes, they are able to affect changes without the real world consequences that their actions would provoke. This includes going on a killing spree or merely fighting for their people and marrying a blonde white person. This is partly a quality of the decoding of the game; it is how these White Nationalists read and play the game. They can perform the role as White Nationalist warriors because the affordances of the game allow it, and this lends itself to support their reading of the game. This is a position that requires some negotiation by the Stormfront users, and relies on a focus on the Nords and the Stormcloak quests. Few would consider this a dominant position given the game as a whole, but this narrow focus helps in their reading. If one draws these parallels to real world Nationalism -- and grant the context of the game as a whole as well as the assumed intentions of the designers -- one could perhaps consider this an oppositional reading. In this reading, the commodities of a multi-cultural society can be used against it, and where the nationalist bad guys of the game's narrative become the good guys when played by White Nationalists.

However, it is important to stress the fact that although the Stormcloak questline supports a White Nationalist perspective, this perspective is not dominant in the remainder of the game. For this reason, I argue that the Stormfront users' supportive reading of the game can be considered a negotiated reading. A negotiated position involves making the game their own and reinvent *Skyrim* as a White Nationalist playground. A negotiated reading would imply that the player understands or sees the intended message, but allows himself the freedom to re-interpret it. *Skyrim* might be pushing the same multicultural agenda, or Bethesda might even be owned by a Jew, but through mods and subversive gameplay the White Nationalists manage to make the game their own. With this negotiated reading, they tell a somewhat different story. This negotiation means that they have to accept aspects of the game that are not in line with their own vision of the world, and which they cannot change through mods.

It is useful, here, to remember that Hall's proposed positions were suggestions and hypotheticals allowing us to work out an understanding of how audiences can oppose hegemonic power. While a negotiated position is a good enough categorization for how Stormfront decodes *Skyrim*, it is perhaps better to see it as a sliding scale or a matrix of positions that will vary with the content we're discussing. Stormfront's interpretation of *Skyrim* is not a united one, but it has enough of commonality to create a discourse of "pro-white" readings of the game and the plight of the Nords as an imagined parallel to that of White Nationalists. The scale slides from a dominant reading in line with the Stormcloaks being White Nationalists to a wilful undermining of the assumed author in order to appropriate the game world for White Nationalism. Most of all, it lingers in between; in

that ambivalent space of negotiated reading that most consumption of popular culture will be found.

Conclusion: Who has the power in Skyrim?

Hegemonic power plays an important part in the encoding-decoding model. Power is not equally distributed between the sender and receiver of a message (Hall 1973). It is from this unequal distribution of power the divergent decoding positions arise. Power relations play an important part in understanding an object's affordances as well. An object is made and designed with an intended use, but may allow for different uses, as imagined by the user. "What counts as a dominant, negotiated, or oppositional use is intrinsically linked to who has the power to define how technologies should be used" writes Adrienne Shaw (2017, 599) in her attempt to join Hall's model with affordance theory, and highlighting its political potential. Designed artifacts are political (Winner 1980), and there is power in the freedom of use and interpretation of artifacts. The designer does not determine an object's use, only creates affordances for use, and how this is used depends not just on the design, but on the users and their politics. It is fully possible to use an artifact for a different political purpose than the designers intended, so when white nationalists find a "home" in the fictitious world of *Skyrim* and a belonging with the rebellious Stormcloaks, they are simultaneously appropriating the gameworld and narrative of *Skyrim* and resisting the assumed intent of the producers.

This leads to the question of what constitutes subversion of intent in an open-world game with so many possible actions and interpretations. If an action is designed to be possible, is it a subversive result of an oppositional reading by the player? Or should it be considered a dominant or preferred reading, as the game indeed allows for it, and may not even discourage this reading by punishing certain actions through game mechanics? The intent of the designers may not matter at all if we focus on the mechanics of a game. Every designed possibility could be considered "intentional", even if not consciously intended by the authors or rewarded by the game mechanics. And when dealing with complex open world systems, it is hard to say what is "intended" by the authors and not. And it isn't really that relevant, as we are dealing in the domain of imagined affordances.

Imagined affordances concern how people actually use objects and systems regardless of the designers' intentions. They are based on the "fears, expectations and their uses, as well as those of the designers" (Nagy & Neff 2015, 4). The opposite is also true; a discussion of affordances should also take into consideration the expectations of the designers (ibid), but they are made less relevant as long as they have designed a game that allows for a multitude of interpretations and action possibilities. This is particularly relevant when the game world engages closely with a White Nationalist worldview, allowing the gameworld to be easily integrated with their own world. To rebel against the expectations of the implied player is to rebel against the game and its designers, and it shifts the power from the game and the designer to the player. This power shift is an important implication of this analysis, using both Hall's model for encoding-decoding and affordances to highlight how the player can take "ownership" of a game world through their interpretations, using the affordances that are designed as part of a game.

These perspectives empower the user, highlighting their opportunities to resist the dominant hegemony and the role of implied player. As it stands, the White Nationalist interpretation of *Skyrim* is as valid as any other decoding of the game. The affordances created by the intersection of the game and of their political position, allows the game to be experienced as a White Nationalist power fantasy, potentially strengthening their narrative and position. But as this interpretation is dependent on an existing White Nationalist framework of thought, it is still an open question of how well the game proselytize the White Nationalist cause. The parallels between the game and White Nationalist ideologies can, however, perhaps be used in constructing an argument for their cause in meetings with people familiar with the game, but not White Nationalism, and this is

suggested by users on Stormfront. This does however require further investigation.

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