Simulating dominance: How procedural rhetoric enforces a false Native nomos in Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind

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Simulating dominance: How procedural rhetoric enforces a false Native nomos in *Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*

by

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A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

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Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
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### Abbreviations

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<tr>
<td>RPG</td>
<td>Role-playing game</td>
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<td>FPS</td>
<td>First-person shooter</td>
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<td>NPC</td>
<td>Non-playable character</td>
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ABSTRACT

In Bethesda Softworks’s *Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, it is possible to reveal the dominant ideologies working beneath its narrative elements and graphical representation of race, clothing, and environment. Using Susan C. Jarratt’s Sophistic *logos* and *nomos*, Ian Bogost’s “procedural rhetoric,” and Gerald Vizenor’s “manifest manners” or “simulations of dominance,” my thesis analyzes these dominant ideologies and reveals the marginalization of the indigenous “other” as post-structural fabrications, which Philip J. Deloria calls “Indianness.” Indianness, invented and mutable, is portrayed mainly through the creation of a fictional indigenous group: the “Ashlanders.” Overall, I argue that the creation of the Ashlanders, the narrative elements attached to them, and how they are represented through procedures or code, perpetuates a Euro-American commodification, marginalization, and erasure of a Native American cultural identity as an act of cultural violence.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Growing up, I played many video games, and often sought out games with role-playing features to somehow extend my own agency within virtual spaces. I enjoyed being able to manipulate my own character in a game—their sex, expressions of gender, general appearance, or capabilities. Since Bethesda Softworks's Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind possessed many of these features, I was naturally enchanted with Morrowind's virtual environment and gameplay. I regarded these features as original and "exotic," and it never occurred to me that a large part of this "exoticism" stemmed from the game’s fictional indigenous people, the "Ashlanders." Overall, I argue that the creation of the Ashlanders, the narrative elements attached to them, and how they are represented through procedures or code, perpetuates a Euro-American commodification, marginalization, and erasure of a Native American cultural identity. Again, this act of cultural violence went unnoticed when I first played Morrowind and remained unnoticed years afterwards as I replayed the game. In fact, despite a background in literature, until my first year as a Master’s student, I never read an American Indian novel. Although I am ashamed of this fact, and acknowledge my own ignorance, my late introduction to American Indian literature allowed me to think about how patriarchal structures, either in the literary canon or at large, push the minority to the fringes of discourse. As a student of women’s literature and gender justice, I began to see how such marginalization of a Native cultural identity paralleled the marginalization of women and feminist discourse, which provided some familiarity and groundwork while beginning my project on Morrowind. Since critical work
on video games is relatively new, part of my thesis provides a framework for examining *Morrowind*.

As mentioned before, *Morrowind’s* procedures represent a fictional, indigenous tribe, the “Ashlanders,” and continue the institutionalization of a Euro-American fabrications of Native cultural identities. What is difficult to examine is how players, while navigating the virtual space afforded by *Morrowind*, co-construct this fabrication with the game’s procedural rhetoric, as described by digital media theorist Ian Bogost. Much of the game’s visual objects or sweeping narrative elements are coded into scripted commands, or procedures, awaiting players’ interaction. Interaction can mean many illusions of control, including the freedom to wear certain virtual apparel, navigate a virtual landscape, engage in “conversation” with NPCs (non-playable characters), or complete various missions or quests. Aside from procedural rhetoric, there are several concepts useful in understanding the co-construction of Native identities: Bogost’s adaptation of the Aristotelian enthymeme, Susan C. Jarrat’s adaptation of Sophistic *logos* and *nomos*, and what American Indian scholars Philip J. Deloria describes as a false “Indianness” and Gerald Vizenor defines as “manifest manners.” Working in tandem, these theories create a critical framework in order to closely examine how players navigate procedural rhetoric that builds upon former, commodified tropes of “Indianness.” Often dismissed as mere fiction, “Indianness” reinforces the inauthenticity of the Native community, and offers players a false fabrication of the Indian from a Euro-American worldview that subjugates and marginalizes a Native cultural identity as inferior. Such subjugation and marginalization ensures the erasure of a Native culture as an act of cultural violence, justified by being further codified into Euro-American *logos*. 
In order to understand how Bethesda represents their fictional indigenous peoples, I will analyze how they construct “floating signifiers” and create a false, marginalized fabrication of “Indianness.” (Deloria 167). My use of Deloria’s “Indianness” will always indicate a false, “Euro-American” invention of the Indian identities (8). In a way, Indianness can be viewed as the building blocks for a false Native nomos, a discursive cultural narrative and history divorced from Native communities’ own logos, easily recognizable from a Euro-American frame of reference and accepted without much thought; in other words, codified into cultural laws, or Euro-American logos. Certainly, Morrowind or other RPGs cannot codify such fabrications alone, but build off of other remediations of commodified Native tropes, or “manifest manners,” that have “simulated dominance” since their first appearance in character and text. Subsequently, new media remediates “manifest manners” since entertainment reshapes Indianness to fit various purposes, reflecting a postcolonial ideology of “the Other” serving the purposes of the colonizer (Larson 35). Just as one would complete a proposition in an Aristotelian enthymeme, players import these remediations into Morrowind, completing implied arguments of Indian representations. Graphical realism makes videogames at large unique, since the

1 Media critics David Jay Bolster and Richard Grusin, explain that no matter how transparent or immediate media becomes (e.g. graphical realism) it still remediates former genres of visual media (in other words, radio becomes television, and television becomes film). In the same way, new media remediates older, problematic tropes found in former mediums.

2 Vizenor explains that “manifest manners” as the “notions and misnomers” of a Native cultural identity, originating from characters in literature, included in an American historical narrative. Their perpetuation in other texts “simulate [a Euro-American] dominance” of Native peoples.


realism provides added immersion, and allows players to surround themselves with fabrications of an Indian identities.

My examination of Morrowind’s virtual Indianness offers more than just criticism regarding identity marginalization enacted by visual representations, but provides a means for discussing the often overlooked rhetorical procedures which create a game’s virtual world, furthermore, a way to map players’ variable experiences within a game’s simulation, often intensified by media realism. Depending on the “immersion” provided by the world’s graphical realism, this virtual aesthetic can provide the illusion of very little procedures. Instead of recognizing procedural arguments proposed by visually represented code, players only perceive their own freedom, an illusion of control over their own agency. Players reinforce this illusion when they financially invest in the realism of a video game by buying expensive hardware to run games at their highest, visual capacity. Morrowind’s release in 2002, along with other video game titles released near that time, marked the advent of graphical realism, widely desired and seen in videogames currently. Aside from buying the latest videogame console (Xbox, Playstation, or Wii), players can spend hundreds of dollars upgrading computer hardware to run videogames at their highest visual quality in order to achieve realism. In other words, players invest in the “immediacy”3 afforded by a game’s three-dimensional meshes, textures, and virtual space. Often, critics call a game’s graphical realism “immersion” and regard it only as an aesthetic, but this term remains poorly defined within the gaming community—it could mean anything from a game’s ability to create simulation, represent a virtual environment, or the perceived freedom for character creation. The purpose of my discussion will not be to pin

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3 Immediacy refers to the emotional intensity hypermedia invokes.
down the intricacies of immersion in videogames, but to stress that it marks a “culture of simulation,” allowing players the ability to manipulate their identity indefinitely (Filiciak 88). What makes a culture of simulation important to examine is that virtual spaces can serve as identity playgrounds, providing players the capability to explore their own discursive narratives, or nomos. However, players’ expressive capabilities come at a cost since they are continually framed by Euro-American ideology. Typically, as players seek further virtual agency within game-spaces, they do so within procedures of gender binaries, misogyny, violence, racism, and in the case of Morrowind, Indianness. As a result, players continually act out ideologies of privilege and dominance.

An application of American Indian studies provides a way to understand how virtual spaces marginalize identity through simulacra⁴ of the Indian. By simulacra, I mean the multiplicity and conflation of false Native identities continually cut off from their own culture, history, or socio-political struggles. If rendered recognizable, these simulacra could be manipulated through virtual procedures or manipulation of hegemonic Euro-American rhetoric to create new spaces of agency. Indianness as a simulacra of a Native identity parallels video games’ many simulacra or actual, virtual simulations of gender, race, and even sexuality. My project could provide a useful means for those within women’s and gender studies, or even those working in multiculturalism, to look to video games as a way to create new “indications of a narrative recreation,” just as Vizenor describes “postindian warriors” navigating the many “simulations of dominance” with new stories of “survivance” (6). For this reason, my project focuses on role-playing games (RPGs) since they provide

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⁴ Owing its original definition to Jean Baudrillard, simulacra are references with no actual referent which create a “hypereality” (Simulacra and Simulations). Baudrillard builds off of Saussurean semiotics, where the signified has no real signifier. Vizenor’s “simulations of manifest manners” stem from this understanding.
players the tools and ability to create their own character’s appearance, sex, race, play style, and enact few boundaries which would prohibit where the player can move within a virtual environment. Alternatively, some videogames perform more superficially than others as “television monitoring” (Bolster and Grusin 93). For example, first-person shooters (FPSs) like the Halo, Call of Duty, or Gears of War, remain difficult to critique due to their loose narrative elements, but more importantly, because they offer players little identity agency. In other words, the pace of the game and the surveillance drives players to defeat foes in order to keep themselves alive; therefore, without any virtual solitude or immersion, players cannot reflect on their own virtual narratives or identity. Furthermore, FPSs and similar genres rarely undergo user modifications, otherwise known as “mods”5. Mods deliberately change the procedures of the game, often to provide a different player experience or nomos. In this way, players could utilize mods to challenge Euro-American procedural rhetoric in Morrowind, or many other games.

Nonetheless, RPGs’ channels for narrative recreation neither justify nor resolve Morrowind’s representation or simulation of Indianness. Whereas some Morrowind user modifications allow players’ characters to seek out same-sex partners, or alternative representations of gender and race, the game’s Ashlanders remain untouched. In fact, as I will explain in Chapter 3, users seek to polarize their own conceptions of Indianness with user modifications. Therefore, what makes Morrowind’s visual or simulated Indianness and remediated “manifest manners” problematic is the game’s perpetuation of a Euro-American logos through indigenous exoticism as an Indian commodity. Different than

5 More specifically, mods are plugin files that add onto the game’s original data content. Mods can change nearly anything, including gameplay, narrative structure, or visual aesthetic. Over a decade later, players still create mods for Morrowind to create new ways to experience and play the game.
passive readers or listeners as with literature and film respectively, players truly re-play a
Euro-American “historical” narrative of the wilderness and frontier. Players encounter,
sometimes violently, the game’s Ashlanders while conquering *Morrowind*’s virtual
landscape and forging their own destiny. At the same time, players see themselves exempt
from causing any real harm since Indianness can be “something” seemingly Indian and yet
fictitious. Even as simulacra, Euro-American *logos* renders Indianness immutable, securing
a cyclical breakdown of Native culture and epistemology with each play-through of
*Morrowind*. The formation of manifest manners and the “simulations of dominance” no
longer rest with the gatekeepers of literature or film, but with a multitude of players. As
players reinforce their own conceptions of Indianness or add to it, the number of outside
experts that safeguard what is “truly Indian” expands, pushing the Native community and
their voices of narrative reconstruction to further margins of discourse. Furthermore, both
the Ashlanders as the exotic, savage “Other” and *Morrowind*’s dated-fantasy realm of armor
and swords situate this narrative in the past, ignoring the social injustice of Native
communities as current and ongoing. Overall, *Morrowind* simulates this Euro-American
*logos* as reality because of RPGs’ unique feature of immersion, elevating immersion beyond
just an aesthetic and an in-game element worthy of examination.

Aside from allowing players more interactivity with signifiers of Indianness,
graphical immersion remains an important link with a game’s interactivity since
immersion closes the emotional gap between user-interface and a player’s interaction with
graphical elements. Even though players would no longer consider *Morrowind*’s graphics as
cutting edge (though in 2002, they were considered impressive), Alison McMahan writes
“Immersion, Engagement, and Presence” that:
“Most scholars and scientists seem to agree that total photo- and audio-
realism is not necessary for a virtual reality environment to produce in the
viewer a sense of immersion, a sense that the world they are in is real and
complete...” (68)

The idea that any kind of media-realism can invoke a feeling of reality resonates
with new media theory’s definition of hypermedia immediacy since immediacy seeks to
offer a (albeit false) virtual world as an appropriate replacement for reality, allowing
players to manipulate graphical elements and even immerse themselves or embody
elements in a meaningful way (Bolster and Grusin 31). Again, the function of embodiment
offers some promise by way of negative capability⁶, a kind of “empathy,” as it allows any
individual to experience alternate narratives, or nomos, but remains confined by a game’s
procedural law, or logos. In the case of Morrowind, whatever alternative identity
experienced or increased sense of agency players create for themselves, only manage to do
so within the confines of Euro-American constructions of Native American epistemology
and culture. Further unsettling, is Morrowind’s ability to stand in for reality, transforming
procedural signifiers of Indianness or Vizenor’s simulations of Indian characters into a real,
systematic destruction of a Native identity. Players simulate destruction while their
immersion with Morrowind’s Indianness makes them privileged insiders to what they
perceive as “true” Native cultural practices. Building on Ward Churchill’s argument about
the Euro-American dissolution of Native culture, so long as Morrowind’s logos of

⁶ The ability to inhabit “the Other’s” point of view.
Indianness remains unchallenged by either user modifications or by player recognition and rejection, they continue cultural violence against Native peoples and further remove their “prime cultural symbol,” tantamount to genocide no matter how “innocent or innocuous”\(^7\) (Churchill 194-95).

A problem with my project is how to negotiate the promise RPG video games possess in the face of such devastating social injustice, often disregarded as trivial or “just a game.” Neither developers nor communities of “modders” can even begin to make smarter virtual spaces that eliminate the privileged self and “Other” binary all together without a framework that outlines games’ cultural pitfalls. So that my examination of Indianness is not criticism for the sake of criticism, I hope my work can point to greater discussion about how players can negotiate with RPGs’ procedural rhetoric—a kind of dissoi-logoi\(^8\) with pre-existing constructs of culture. Such discussion provides space for everyone’s own “human-measure,” restoring humanity to the simulacra of humans in virtual spaces, as our culture discovers and promotes new ways for individuals to physically and cognitively interact with simulation (Mendelson 50).

\(^7\) Churchill cites several others before stating this himself, including former American Indian Movement (AIM), Russell Means, as well as Canadian scholars Mark Davis And Robert Zannis.


\(^8\) This term refers to Michael Mendelson’s work on Sophistic antilוגic, the ability to argue both sides of an argument. Instead of accepting one “true” worldview, communities can engage in dissoi-logoi, or argue, with pre-existing or previously accepted worldviews, reaching a subjective worldview that best suits the context of the community.

CHAPTER 2: CRITICAL FRAMEWORK

As mentioned in my introduction, there are several theoretical concepts useful in understanding the co-construction of Indianness in Morrowind: logos, nomos, procedural rhetoric, enthymeme, Indianness, and manifest manners. These adapted concepts work well with each other, and before proceeding with the rest of this chapter, I will briefly explain how they work in tandem. Morrowind's procedural rhetoric, the building blocks for all of the game's representations as well as means of enacting virtual boundaries, acts as a microcosm of Euro-American logos. Therefore, Morrowind's virtual logos reflects the patriarchal dominance and hegemony pervasive in Euro-American culture, and disseminates "manifest manners" and Indianness just as well. Although "manifest manners" and Indianness both explain fabrications of the Indian, "manifest manners" is a useful way of identifying how the multiplicity of Indianness condenses into singular tropes. Often, these tropes appear in film or literature, extending the hand of Euro-American colonization as (Vizenor describes) "simulations of dominance." "Manifest manners" renders Indianness tangible, easily exchanged for added exoticism, increased sense of spirituality, or to justify racism. In Morrowind, "manifest manners" helps players manipulate Indianness, gathering notions of what "could" be Indian and completing Euro-American propositions about Native identity, or Bogost's adapted Aristotelian enthymemes. By completing enthymemes, importing their own conceptions of Indianness, players add to a false, Euro-American nomos, which dictates a similarly inaccurate Native nomos. Through graphical realism, Morrowind's procedures creates a simulation of reality for players, which then codifies their experience with Indianness into logos. As a player replays Morrowind, this cycle
repeats. These chapters will breakdown each term or concepts individually, further explaining their relationship with other terms, and provide narrative or visual examples from *Morrowind* to further define these terms within the game’s context.

**Logos and Nomos**

My adaptation of Sophistic logos and nomos, along with Bogost’s procedural rhetoric, explains the virtues videogames possess in the face of game’s constraining ideologies, and provides insight into the reasons why members of the gaming community defend games despite the damage they render. In RPGs, players can create virtual nomos or “narratives to radically reconstruct their own [virtual] histories in terms which [open] space for difference”—agency for marginalized voices or identities (Jarratt 74). In short, players create nomos by changing the inherent procedures of the game through user modifications and tools, also known as “mods”. Mods can manipulate, add onto, or eliminate a game’s inherent procedures in order to change many features in a game.

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9 In June of 2012, Anita Sarkeesian, a pop culture media critic, created a Kickstarter campaign (a website tool used to raise funds for creative projects) to begin a video series that analyzed problematic feminine tropes overused in videogames, to show how these tropes marginalize women’s identity agency. When she released a video outlining what the work would entail, and why it was important, various YouTube users responded with comments such as: “Would be better if she filmed this in the kitchen,” or “You hate your father too, don’t you?” These are only two mild examples of a long list of derogatory comments in response to her YouTube video. A clear example of the misogyny present in Euro-American logos, but also indicates an anxiety felt by gamers when their virtual resource, which offers just as much a way to increase identity agency as it has the potential to constrain it, seems in jeopardy.

10 User generated mods often drive players to continue gameplay even after completion, resulting in large gaming communities which share mods.

Therefore, nomos opposes the inherent procedural rhetoric of a RPG’s virtual representations and boundaries. More importantly, nomos provides a way to discuss one’s own (or a community’s) personal narrative and history. I tie Jarrett’s logos with Bogost’s procedural rhetoric since he describes procedural rhetoric as “the practice of authoring arguments through processes” which creates an “authorship of rules of behavior.” He goes on to explain a game’s procedural rhetoric remains no different from cultural procedures “tied to laws,” which convey certain ideologies and can “cloud” our ability to see other ways of thinking (Persuasive 3). According to Bogost’s explanation, procedural rhetoric acts as the logos of a game, and for my discussion, I will use the two terms interchangeably. His explanation contrasts with Jarratt’s idea of nomos, when she explains: “In opposition of logos as a permanent and ‘natural’ structure of law, rationality, or language, nomos can be called into play as an alternative, designating the human, and thus necessarily discursive, construction of changeable codes” (74). Players’ abilities to enact their own nomos through
mods allows them to stand in direct opposition to a game’s *logos*, and by extension, a game’s procedural rhetoric. In this sense, players could escape various forms of oppression (i.e. racism or sexism) embedded in a game.

Michael Mendelson’s discussion on the tension between the classical Sophists’ *dissoi-logoi*, as part of the “human measure doctrine,” with traditional Platonic “absolute truth,” provides a way to clarify the opposition between *logos* and *nomos*. Since *dissoi-logoi* is not central to my examination of Indianness, my explanation will only cover how his understanding applies to my adaptation of *logos* and *nomos*. In short, *dissoi-logoi* mediates the Sophists’ conception of “relative truths,” a way for communities to enact or agree on a worldview true to their own history or context. Relative truth opposes the classical and absolute truth, or in the case of *Morrowind*, opposes Euro-American *logos* and its fabrications of identity.

Typically, a mod goes through several versions before the creator leaves it alone and calls it “final.” In part, the reason why a mod will go through several versions derives from community discussion forums. In this sense, mods invoke the use of *dissoi-logoi*, in that gamers will suggest changes to the creator of the mod, exchange ideas, and eventually come to some compromise, “true” to the communities own frame of reference (Mendelson 50). For instance, a year after creators released an initial *Morrowind* “Romance” mod, they added three additional plugins, including one for same-sex couples. The mod’s community discussion page indicates that some players continued to ask the creators to add same-sex couples and even marriage to mod’s procedures up until release of the final version (Morrowind Mods). Perhaps a more visual example of *nomos* by way of *dissoi-logoi* is modders introduction of a “better bodies” mod for *Morrowind*; the gaming community
accepted a better visual appearance for NPC models, specifically a male character model that didn’t look overtly masculine.

In this way, the gaming community argued different relative truths in order to come to some agreement on how players might change the game’s reflected worldview on male, gender representation. Before implementation of the Better Bodies mod (Figure 2), male character models looked too sharply defined as an early graphical attempt at a highly muscular, male physique. This representation of a masculine gender can be limiting to a player’s own nomos. Therefore, the creators of the Better Bodies mod created a more graphically realistic representation of flesh and bone, and a version of masculinity with less emphasis on muscle definition (Figure 2 and 3). These examples of player modifications prove that although RPG developers can enact dominant, marginalizing ideologies with the introduction of a
new game, players possess a potential to diminish the influence of these ideologies, this allows players to reconstruct a virtual worldview that meets their own context of identity, a tool for continued dissoi-logoi with the game’s procedural rhetoric. However, with the absence of a cultural context or history, dissoi-logoi is impossible.

What makes games similar to Morrowind problematic, and erases the virtues of virtual nomos that could contend with Euro-American constructions of an Indian identity, is popular media’s American nomos and fabricated Native nomos. In this case, the “men of maxims,”11 use both Euro-American logos and fabricated nomos to create indisputable, monolithic constructs of culture (Jarratt 76). Admittedly, similar marginalization occurs with portrayals of femininity. Whether in Morrowind or other games within the Elder Scrolls series, gaming communities often create mods that sexualize and objectify women’s bodies. If nothing else, the continued co-construction of Indianness and patriarchal femininity speaks to the lasting influence of “manifest manners” or feminine appropriations in some the oldest forms of media. Not to be misunderstood as a universal oppression between women and Native communities, but the ways both forms of marginalization parallel one another points to a greater discussion of how other disciplines can begin to unravel virtual, Euro-American logos of identity. Regarding “manifest manners” specifically, the simulations of Indian identities in the earliest forms of literature serves as a American origin story, making it crucial to push Native communities to the

11 Jarratt uses this term to refer to those in charge of dominant cultural stories. Her examination considers feminism, and she explains how those in charge of patriarchal institutions have not only pushed feminist theory to the margins of discourse, but have constructed their own nomos about femininity, and codified into logos, making it indisputable.

furthest margins of discourse. Otherwise, Native logos, situated within its own history and cultural context, challenges the very foundations of an American, national identity.

**Manifest Manners Simulating Dominance**

Simply put, American nomos owes its roots to Vizenor’s “manifest manners” which break down Native logos—the displacement of the Native cultural identities from its own cultural, historical, and geographical context by way of character and text. Deloria’s *Playing Indian* explains the origins of “manifest manners” and American nomos with his insights on the way 18th and 19th century Americans used a fabricated metaphor of “Indianness” to aid their own revolutionary struggles, and at the same time established a “national enemy” (3). As the salvation for the American consciousness, American nomos fabricates an American identity, since the then budding nation perpetuated the same imperialistic tendencies they sought to escape, and were unable to reconcile their inability to be truly “native” to the lands they staked claim to. Therefore, American nomos continually supplants Native logos through the remediation of “manifest manners” in order to reify a dominant, white American identity and history. In *Morrowind*, players act out similarly as they forge their character and experience new levels of agency amongst Indianness, commodified for a higher sense of entertainment value. Players simulate a national identity that praises individuality through refiguring the Indian to suit the desires of *Morrowind’s logos*. One way players refigure the Indian is by importing “manifest manners” into game-space or by lumping Indianness into a recognizable trope. Overall, American nomos uses “manifest manners” to convey a false Native nomos, an untouchable history even by members of the Native community. Therefore, “manifest manners” “simulate dominance” which encode
“notions and misnomers” into literature and other forms of media culture to “replace rather than represent Indian reality,” at which point manifest manners become a Euro-American logos (Vizenor 8). In other words, “manifest manners” become the status-quo in Euro-American culture—moreover, protected by the solidarity of the many invested in an American national identity.

An abridged example of the remediation of these manifest manners, relevant for discussing their presence in Morrowind, owes its roots to James Fenimore Cooper and like authors. A more specific example includes Cooper’s The Redskins: Indian and Injin, a fictionalized “apologia” for the Hudson River valley landlords assaulted by Indian-disguised assailants during the New York anti-rent conflicts of the 1840s (Deloria 39). The Hudson River valley’s “resident Indian” pacified the uprising, and aside from establishing an identity binary, the “Noble-savage” and the “savage-savage,” easily abused for various purposes, the written text serves as an example of how literature situates Indian identities within a Euro-American frame of reference. As writers began to encode a false Native nomos in literature, manifest manners remained unchecked by political or geographical expressions as colonists moved into Native territories since they were instead expressed culturally through story and character. Over time, this fabricated nomos becomes less of a narrative or alternate history, and instead codified into accepted cultural law through future remediations of a false Native nomos by way of Western films and the cowboy hero. John Wayne as “The Ringo Kid” in Stagecoach (1939) is a more specific, and perhaps more classic instance of American nomos shadowing Native nomos. In this case, the American nomos becomes amplified in opposition to a false Native nomos, as the cowboy hero reifies an American identity by pushing Native voice and identities to the margins (Berkhofer 24).
The American *nomos* of the white hero gets remediated sympathetically as an outside savior to Native communities or even the “romantic-savage” in Michael Mann's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992); Hawkeye, the white protagonist, and reared as a Mohican, ends up becoming an object of romantic “scopophilia.” Finally, in James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009), there is not only an outside hero, but the film articulates pan-indigenousness as Native identity and epistemology since it conflates signifiers from various indigenous cultures. New media's ability to conflate signifiers creates what Deloria describes as a post-structural representation of “Indianness,” apt for describing *Morrowind*'s visual and narrative elements bound by scripted procedures.

**Indianness, Floating Signifiers, and Enthymeme**

Many of the visual elements in *Morrowind* use floating signifiers derived from invented tropes used by “white-shamanism” or “New Agers.” In short, Lisa Aldred describes “white-shamans” or “New Agers” in the same light and as self-proclaimed experts on Native epistemology and cosmology to restore cultural, communal, and spiritual meaning in their own lives, left barren by mainstream consumer culture (Aldred 329). Just as the New Age movement began and increased consumption and commodification of Indian spirituality and cosmology, *Morrowind* perpetuates the same outcome through its media (Aldred 330). Overall, such a representation of Indianness perpetuates a Euro-American ideology and historical narrative of post-colonization, and one similar to the cowboy and Indian premise (since *Morrowind* portrays Ashlanders as both passive inhabitants or violent) described in the previous chapter, and recycled repeatedly in entertainment. Again, *Morrowind* provides many possibilities for players to increase their identity agency by way of negative
capability or “empathy,” but it enacts a false Native *nomos* which represents a rhetoric that perpetuates participation within a Euro-American worldview preoccupied with subjugation and domination (*How To 2*).

For a player, the effect is twofold: visual signifiers of Indianness offer a false, virtual world and hypermedia immediacy which becomes an emotional replacement for reality as players manipulate floating signifiers and in some instances, embody them. However, *Morrowind* subverts any possibility of an individual seeing the virtual world through an indigenous lens because an individual can only plug-in into Euro-American constructions of Indianness, perpetuating an ideological worldview of indigenous inferiority, while truly “simulating dominance” (Vizenor 5). In this sense, videogames, specifically *Morrowind*, have the potential to be ideological by acting out the game’s procedures (Douglas 23).

Ian Bogost writes in the preface of *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* that through “ingrained metaphors that most people take for granted, [games] deploy more abstract representations about the way the world does or should function” (Preface, x). This implies both the virtual world the game represents and the real world that it reflects. Therefore, videogames possess ideological potential by user interactivity or manipulation of “engrained metaphors” or rather Deloria’s “floating [visual] signifiers” of Indianness. However, the extent to which players interpret Indianness reside not only in the signifiers alone, but the procedures of the game as well, what a player can or cannot do. Just as Euro-American *logos* informs our culture, the similarity between Bogost’s procedural rhetoric as “engrained metaphors” and Indianness creates a *logos* that virtually institutionalizes players. Players must interpret, respond to, or interact with these codified
metaphors, and Bogost’s adaptation of the Aristotelian enthymeme maps this subjective interactivity.

Bogost describes the Aristotelian enthymeme as a listener coming to an unspoken conclusion, inferred by previous propositions within a syllogism, a kind of logical argument. He then defines enthymemes in videogames as a player “[preforming] mental synthesis, filling the gap between subjectivity and game process” (Persuasive Games 43). In short, players complete ideological arguments made by the game’s procedures or “engrained metaphors” with their own ideas of how the world works or any conception of a false Native nomos. In Morrowind, while players explore, as Bogost proposes, the possible “space” afforded by the rules or procedures in a game, players also explore the Euro-American representations of Indian identity, compounding their own Euro-American conceptions of Indianness, disseminated by various media. Ultimately, players reinforce any prior, Euro-American constructions of Indianness. For my discussion, I will focus on how this is done in two ways: first, by examining visual signifiers of a (false) Indianness, and second, the context of the virtual world the game creates. Before beginning my analysis, the following section of this chapter will provide a brief synopsis of Morrowind’s main storyline as a simple context that both of my analysis chapters will operate within.

Synopsis

The main storyline of the game requires the player to fulfill a prophecy, outlined by seven visions, by a group of indigenous tribes known as the “Ashlanders.” Morrowind portrays Ashlanders as “Dark Elves” or ”Dunmer,” and they consist of four tribes found on the outskirts of Morrowind’s virtual space. The game’s opening cinematic explains that the
player possesses unknown origins, but enters the nation of Morrowind ordained by a god-like being to become the savior of the Ashland people, the “Nerevarine” or “Nerevar Moon-and-Star.” For the game’s hero this also means that the player must defeat a malevolent god-like being responsible for a “blight” that threatens the land as a whole by the end of the main storyline; this accomplishment serves as the end of the Nervarine’s in-game duties even though the hero is foreseen “[restoring] traditional ancestor worship practiced by the Ashlanders, and [driving] all outlanders from Morrowind” (Morrowind). By progressing through the game’s main storyline, players find that their arrival to Morrowind was not by complete chance or divine right, but a ploy enacted by the Emperor, the leader of a people known as the “Imperials.” As such, the player’s work with the Imperial’s “grandmaster spy” was meant to turn the player into a Nerevarine “imposter.” Even though the player does in fact fulfill the Nerevarine prophecy by completing tests set by the Ashlanders and gaining their trust, the Imperial’s ends for an imposter go unmentioned. This synopsis only covers the storyline and objectives of the main quest, even though after completion the player can still move about Morrowind’s virtual landscape, complete smaller quest, and continue to build their character.
CHAPTER 3: VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS

This chapter will examine several categories of floating signifiers that make up various visual representations of Indianness. Much like the lore or in-game context of *Morrowind*, these visual representations get codified into the *logos* of the game by way of procedural rhetoric. As mentioned before, since Deloria’s explanation of post-structural, floating signification of Indianness resembles the way in which Bogost describes videogames’ ideological engrained metaphors, I can show how ideological visual representations of procedural rhetoric break down and marginalize Native cultural identities as an act of cultural violence. Similar to Vizenor’s “manifest manners,” the
floating signifiers that make up Indianness conveys “notions” of Native Americans, consistently conveying an ambivalent Indian identity through the savage-savage/Noble-savage binary (Aldred 341). These notions multiply since players can manipulate these signifiers in the virtual space. Aside from the player using, wearing, or embodying various Ashland signifiers, the game juxtaposes them on top of character and scene. The procedures mix and match various kinds of weapons, clothing, or armor worn by the game’s NPCs, placed in various locations of Indianness.

**Clothing**
Out of all the signifiers of Indianness, clothing is the most difficult to explain due to the way *Morrowind* conflates signifiers from various other indigenous tropes. *Morrowind* further distorts visual representation of clothing when these signifiers appear next to Ashland NPC names or titles. Some of the names of Ashland NPCs include “Zallit,” or “Kaushad,” both men, and “Urshamusa,” one of the tribe’s wise women. Overall, the most notable signifiers of Indianness include the clothing and accessories of the non-playable characters found in the four Ashland tribes. Accessories include Ashland hair, earrings, hair adornments, and even face paint. Often Ashland accessories or clothing portray colorful beadwork, elaborate patterns, clusters of feathers, fur patchwork, and material that resembles buckskin. Many of the images in this section catalogue these examples, and I
include so many to show the way signification of Indianness multiplies as players move between tribes; the game’s way of representing “something” seemingly Indian, while none of these in-game items signify a American Native identity as it exists within its own history or culture.

Noticeably, many signifiers appear on women, in particular, the tribes’ wise women. Likely, they appear predominately on women because Bethesda wants to reflect an Indian matriarchy guiding the Ashlanders. This portrayal would be praise worthy in contrast to the patriarchal dominance in Euro-American ideology, but Ashlander tribes, matriarchal or not, have no agency within the land of Morrowind outside of their small encampments on the outskirts of the continent. Likely, as a patriarchal system, the anxiety of metaphorical castration holds true in Morrowind's logos, preventing any alternative that threatens the “law of the father.” Furthermore, as an extension of Euro-American logos, this appropriation of wise women by Indianness situates or appropriates the feminine aesthetic amongst these signifiers, subjecting them to the “gaze” of players, men and women alike, feminizing these female NPCs as submissive objects. Since Ashland women are the main way players communicate with Ashland tribes, Morrowind feminizes the entirety of the Ashlanders by limiting interaction with any other masculine identity that might challenge a Euro-American patriarchy. Alternatively, the procedures of the game display the male war leaders, joint leaders with wise women, with notable head adornments or crowns. Though some of the wise women display feather accessories, some on top of the head, the war

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12 Without taking too much time to explain Laura Mulvey’s “male gaze,” I am referring to the way in which dominant structures of patriarchy situate femininity as objects of beauty when emphasized or focused on.

leaders' head adornments mark the notion of the feather headdress, popularly associated with Indian warrior-leaders. Although true, it would be too easy to merely claim that these signifiers perpetuate only a distortion of a Native cultural identities.

Bethesda’s construction of Ashland clothing best supports Aldred’s explanation of Pierre Bourdieu’s “culture specialists” (342). In the case of *Morrowind*, Bethesda acts as specialists, “ransacking” other cultures’ cosmologies, practices, and even aspects of epistemologies as a consumer good. Aldred’s discussion of culture specialists reveals a way to understand how Euro-American *logos* commodifies Indianness as “exotic blends” of other indigenous cultures (343). Similar to the way she describes “New Agers” discovering a sense of community or spirituality through these culture specialists, players acting as the “Nerevarine” seek similar feelings. As the graphical realism of signifiers closes the

![Figure 6: Common clothing worn by Dark Elves in cities](image1)

![Figure 7: Common clothing worn by Dark Elves in cities](image2)
emotional gap between virtual elements and players, this feeling becomes intensified—at the very least, the players’ sense of otherworldly exoticism becomes intensified. Therefore, the focus remains on a player’s *nomos*, and the experience it generates. The commodification of Indianness provides players a means to consume their own *nomos*, allowing the referent of the Ashlanders to fade from significance all together, truly echoing the way American Indian social justice fades from an American, national consciousness. *Morrowind*’s procedural rhetoric reinforces an insignificant and fading Ashland referent since the clothing, though in appearance exclusive to Ashland tribes, remains categorized as “common.” Much unlike other “common” apparel worn by Dark Elves in the “civilized” cities, Ashland clothing appears different than the muted, single color shirts or pants commonly worn throughout *Morrowind* (see Figure 10 and 11). Failing to at least name tribal clothing “Ashland” proves that the Euro-American *logos* cares nothing for even the fictitious ties that connect Indianness. As an act of ideological dominance, Euro-American *logos* only establishes laws or boundaries that protects a Euro-American *nomos*. The inferiority of Ashland armor and weapons, concepts central to *Morrowind*’s gameplay, establishes another way *Morrowind*’s procedural rhetoric ensures the protection of a Euro-American *nomos*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Adm</th>
<th>Hrt</th>
<th>Str</th>
<th>Chop</th>
<th>Slash</th>
<th>Thrust</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chitin Spear</td>
<td>chitin spear</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1–2</td>
<td>1–2</td>
<td>5–13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iron Spear</td>
<td>iron spear</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>2–4</td>
<td>2–4</td>
<td>6–15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iron Spear</td>
<td>iron Long Spear</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1–3</td>
<td>1–3</td>
<td>5–20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steel Spear</td>
<td>steel spear</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>1,000</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>2–5</td>
<td>2–5</td>
<td>6–17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 8: Chart including an example of Chitin weapon rating*

commonly worn throughout *Morrowind* (see Figure 10 and 11). Failing to at least name tribal clothing “Ashland” proves that the Euro-American *logos* cares nothing for even the fictitious ties that connect Indianness. As an act of ideological dominance, Euro-American *logos* only establishes laws or boundaries that protects a Euro-American *nomos*. The inferiority of Ashland armor and weapons, concepts central to *Morrowind*’s gameplay, establishes another way *Morrowind*’s procedural rhetoric ensures the protection of a Euro-American *nomos*.

**Armor and Weapons**
Weapons and armor serve as central means of surviving in *Morrowind’s* virtual landscape and central means for completing main storyline or quest objectives. Players judge a weapon’s effectiveness based on a chance to deal damage to foes through three different means: chopping, slashing, and thrusting. Every weapon in *Morrowind* provides a range of minimum and maximum damage possible for each category. Armor’s effectiveness stems from just one attribute: “armor rating.” Armor rating simply means the amount of protection or physical damage absorption a piece of armor can withstand. The offensive or defensive capacities of weapons and armor can remain fairly hidden during gameplay. Upon hitting an enemy, players cannot see the numerical amount of damage executed or in the same way, how much damage their armor absorbed. The procedural rhetoric remains closely tied to discrete script and calculations. An examination of the weapons and armor Ashlanders typically use reveals procedural rhetoric arguing a Euro-American *logos of*
indigenous inferiority, especially so when coupled with their considerable distance from main cities, and meager means to protect themselves from the elements.

In many of the Ashlander tribes, male NPCs typically wear something known as “Chitin” armor and use Chitin weapons; armor described as, “a light plate armor constructed by laminating several layers of insect shell glued with organic resins” (“Chitin Armor”). Not only does this type of armor situate Indianness within the wilderness by way of the lamination of insect shells, but as one might imagine, the shells are inferior when compared to steel, ebony, or many other kinds of armor in the game. Compared to common weapon types, iron and steel, Chitin weapons’ offensive capabilities remain inferior by comparison. In fact, Chitin weapons rank lowest for their damage capabilities in every weapon category that includes them (clubs, short swords, axes, daggers, spears, throw weapons, and bows). Alternatively, the procedural rhetoric behind Chitin armor proves more complicated (“Chitin Weapons”).

Figure 10: Screenshot featuring user created Ashland armor
While Chitin armor ranks lower in armor rating when compared to medium and heavy armor types, it ranks above various kinds of leather armor, and ranks equivalent to some scale armors within the light armor category. Conceivably, players may find themselves wearing Chitin armor as they acquire it in *Morrowind*, at which point, the player’s own nomos influences or frames the armor’s overall effectiveness. Importing past “manifest manners,” they complete a proposition of utility posited by the game’s procedural rhetoric. Perhaps the exoticism of Chitin armor aligns with their own conceptions of Indianness, and embodying this particular signification of Indianness will satisfy their need to Romanticize or fetishize the Noble-savage (Aldred 341). Alternatively, a player’s previous conception of Indianness may propose Chitin as savage technology, inferior to civilized and dominant forces. In either case, *Morrowind*’s procedural rhetoric invites players to further manipulate Indianness by role-playing an Indian identity, justifying a player’s ability to interpret Native cultural identity, encouraging players to further degrade primary, Native cultural symbols. Should the exoticism of playing an Ashlander prove too inferior for gameplay, players can always change the procedures of

![Figure 11: Appearance of Chitin weapons](image-url)
the game to suit their needs. For example, one user modification hosting site features an entire page of Ashland modifications to make “role playing an Ashlander more enjoyable” (“Morrowind Mods”). The most notable mods include different armors for players to use in case Chitin proves too weak or not exotic enough. In Figure 15, a user modifies procedures for newer, “lore-friendly”\(^\text{13}\) Ashland armor that possesses more offensive and defensive capabilities. Since the mod’s description characterizes the armor as “lore-friendly,” this particular player proposes new signifiers of Indianness which fit into the in-game history or narrative elements, discussed in Chapter 4. If nothing else, the signification of Chitin armor provides one example of how players can easily codify their own nomos into Morrowind’s logos.

**Character and Location**

Ashland character and their virtual native lands come together in such a way to justify the destruction of a Native cultural identity by pushing Indianness to the boundaries of virtual space, perhaps out of the Morrowind’s constructed logos, out of Euro-American acknowledgement. On a whole, it is difficult for the Euro-American consciousness to create an Indianness that is both consumable or exotic, and easily ignored, but once completed, a Euro-American logos can easily appropriate and dissolve Native cultural identities for various purposes. The Ashlands and their inhabitants exist as a convenient signifier of Indianness in order to achieve these purposes. Peculiarly, out of the four Ashlands tribes, only two exist in regions characteristically Ashlands. Cut in half, the other two tribes reside in Morrowind’s “Grazelands,” a region of Morrowind with larger stretches of grassland and

\(^{13}\) By “lore-friendly,” players usually means it will fit into the visual representation of the world seamlessly, and adhere to the preexisting narrative structures.
few trees. Although tribes in the Grazelands border Ashland territory closely, as a fictitious indigenous group, Bethesda designers could have easily called the tribes the “Grazelanders” since the creation of Ashlanders did not exist in previous *Elder Scrolls* games. Therefore, their association with “ash” signifies a post-apocalyptic Indianness, justifying the Indian identity as it exists within the ashes of its own culture or way of life.

![Figure 12: Screenshot of Morrowind's Ashlands](image)

The surrounding environment of the Ashlander tribes reflects an unforgiving and savage landscape, and I will briefly describe the signifiers that create this landscape. As their name denotes, some of their tribes either exist near to or within a region that consists of an ash-colored landscape, in part, due to the volcanic center of Morrowind. As seen in Figure 17, the environments surrounding Morrowind’s “civilized” cities appears lush and verdant. Conversely, pockets of lava dot the surface of the Ashlands, and the occasional fern or thick, barren tree emerge as its only vegetation. This region also experiences harsh “ash storms” which resemble metrological dust storms. Imaginably, Ashlanders have difficulty
protecting themselves from ash storms since tribes possess no city walls. Similar to the colonial, American frontier and wilderness, little exists as a means of protection against wildlife that surrounds any of the tribes, including those situated in the Grazelands. The Ashlander tribes have small “yurts” to protect the community from the desolate wilderness, equipped with several tanning racks, a “manifest manner” that all Indians live in teepees and use solely primitive technology. Furthermore, each tribe consists of roughly ten yurts, as opposed to other cities with upwards of fifty. Although the population varies from tribe to tribe, no more than fifteen NPC characters wander around encampments or reside in yurts—again, a significantly small amount compared to other cities.

Overall, these signifiers attempt to affirm a sympathetic treatment of Indianness, by representing a small (perhaps dwindling) indigenous people pushed to barren or remote outskirts of a nation. However, the placement and number of the Ashlanders never changes. I will discuss in chapter 4, nothing pushes the player to interact with the

Figure 13: Unlike the Ashlands, the environment near some larger cities
Ashlanders aside from the main storyline, and upon completion, no narrative element or signifier restores the Ashlanders’ land or drives out colonizing forces. Ashland significations remain permanent structures within *Morrowind’s* and *Elder Scrolls* series’ logos, only to serve as a new interpretation of Indianness for popular consumption. Even in subsequent *Elder Scrolls* games, their narratives explain how the Nerevarine leaves the Ashlanders and the province all together, abandoning the duties prescribed to the reincarnated hero (*Oblivion*). After fulfilling or consuming their own nomos, players leave the gameplay of *Morrowind* and leave Ashlanders forever situated amongst the ash, lava, and savage wildlife. Both the lack of an indigenous community and tumultuous landscape acknowledge a post-apocalyptic narrative of Indianness, and reflects the words of William Gross in “The Cosmic Vision of Anishinaabe Culture and Religion:”

“American Indians in general have seen the end of worlds. There are no Indian cultures in the United States that remain wholly unaffected by the presence of Euro-Americans [...] Also, there is no Indian nation that can claim to be living in complete accord with its precontact culture [...] Thus, American Indians are living in a post-apocalyptic environment” (449)
Unsettling enough, Morrowind becomes completely destroyed according to the narrative elements, or “lore,” in *Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. In short, a chain of natural disasters causes the volcano at the center of *Morrowind’s* virtual landscape to erupt, destroying most of the inhabitants (“The Red Year”). What’s left of the Ashlands truly resembles the “end of worlds,” signifying an Indianness destined for destruction as players revisit *Morrowind* even a decade after its release, whether through normal gameplay or by way of mod. With the passing of the savage landscape, so does the “savage” of the savage-savage/Noble-savage binary symbolically die, leaving Native cultural practices subject to appropriation, a way for Euro-American *logos* to “sympathetically honor” the deceased nation’s “ancient ways.”

![Aerial view of one of the four, Ashland camps](image)
CHAPTER 4: THE CONFINES OF IN-GAME CONTEXT OR “LORE”

In order to understand how cultural violence occurs in *Morrowind*, this chapter will analyze “lore” as it reflects and perpetuates Euro-American cultural stories or *logos*, and the ways “manifest manners” emerge as translations of their previous constructions in character and text. Larger RPGs (ones that consist of multiple installments) have established “lore.” Lore typically consists of larger contextual elements about a game’s virtual environments, characters, and races, which establish a history for players to operate within. In many ways, lore serves as a virtual context for players; in fact, these contextual elements remain rather static despite being fictional, and RPG communities at large often frown upon members that change these elements in user modifications. Therefore, lore stands as larger structures of *logos* in RPGs—*Morrowind* proves no different. This chapter will examine the larger contextual elements of *Morrowind’s* lore including its in-game history and main storyline, as it pertains to the Ashlanders, as well as the construction of race.

Lore and the Construction of Race

The Imperial race and Dark Elf race contrast in a way that best signify how the game’s contextual elements and *logos* create a marginalized signification of Indianness. This provides a basis for the following sections in this chapter, since both races discussed play pivotal roles in the *Elder Scrolls’* lore, and *Morrowind’s* main storyline elements. According to lore, the Ashlanders only consist of Dark Elves and immediately reflect “the Other” because of their dark, grey skin and red eyes. The signification of the Ashlanders not
only denotes color, but consists of attributes that signify savageness and the Ashland wilderness through the unique color of their eyes, which resemble the red lava pits often found within the Ashlands. Imaginably, their savageness makes them “strong and agile” “warriors” or war wizards as described in Morrowind’s manual (see Figure 19). Perhaps the way in which the game “others” the Ashlanders is best evident when contrasted with

![Figure 15: Excerpt from Morrowind manual regarding Dark Elves](image)

the “Imperials.” Imperials, a dominant, colonizing force in Morrowind, appear as emblematic representation of a Western race. Heralding from land central to the game’s world map (i.e., the cultural and racial “center” of the world), their skin is white and their nation wears armor representative of Rome. Aside from visual representations, the game’s lore proposes biological constructions of race (an idea typically at the heart of racism) through every race’s “Skill Bonuses” or “Specials.” As procedural rhetoric, these bonuses or special abilities afford races certain combat proficiencies and race-specific spells.
In *Morrowind’s* manual description, the game represents Dark Elves, and by extension Ashlanders, as the “noble-savage” (Deloria 4). Their “intellect with strong and agile physiques,” not to mention their “Specials,” separates them positively, noble, from the other races in the game, but at the same time appropriates them as only indigenous warriors or “war-wizards” (see Figure 19). All of the Dark Elves’ “Skill Bonuses” enhance offensive capabilities, not only aligning with their description as “warriors” or “wizards,” but prohibits other means of agency, unlike Imperials with their bestowed bonuses in “Speechcraft” and “Mercantile” (i.e, speech and trade), in addition to their offensive bonuses (see Figure 20). Arguably, players complete an enthymeme that characterizes Ashlanders as uncivilized “savages,” only talented in combat. Dark Elves’ special abilities overtly marks an Indianness since Dark Elf players and NPCs receive the ability to summon an “Ancestor Guardian,” commodifying Native culture and religion, while the ability to resist fire damage as a unique and supernatural defense completes the savage-savage counterpart to the noble-savage/savage-savage binary. More specifically, the “Ancestor Guardian” ability allows players and NPCs to receive “sanctuary” or temporary

![Excerpt from manual regarding Imperials](image-url)
imperviousness from violent blows—a spiritual protection—building on New Age appropriations of Native religion, reduced to mere elements akin to magic. Conversely, Imperials consist of “shrewd diplomats and traders” that erect monuments of peace by colonizing other lands while using “Star of the West” and “The Emperor’s Voice” (see Figure 20)

In short, the Imperial’s two “Special” abilities raise a player’s or NPC’s “charisma,” creating an ironic caricature of an invasive race relying only on eloquence to push “Others” from their lands and expand Imperial rule. From this brief introduction to the virtual biology of the game, players must exist in a world where Western colonizers possess traits indicative of oratory and diplomatic peace, which allow Imperials to “subdue” rather than dominate. In addition to these brief introductions to race, the “lore” of the game also simulates a Euro-American nomos, the alternative narrative that masks imperialistic dominance; in this case, any colonization and imperialism, despite the displacement, domination, or marginalization of others, is ironically done in “peace.” Furthermore, in the manual, the descriptions state that the Empire created the title “Dark Elf” versus the use of “Dunmer,” noting a tension between culture and power. Again, Morrowind simulates a historical narrative of Native American history in the U.S., the assimilation of Native peoples, particularly done in boarding schools, where Native individual’s names and languages were replaced with English. In the same way, Imperials’ colonization of “all other provinces,” favors their use of a “universal” categorization, justified through peace (Berkhofer 24). Overall, the game reinforces a Euro-American logos that all indigenous tribes make up one group, and their language or what they call themselves, their referent, must go unrecognized and disappear.
In-Game History

When players begin their journey in *Morrowind*, they encounter various in-game texts that provide basic lore for the virtual region they will be navigating. Similar to how Euro-American manifest manners have been codified into literature, these in-game books resemble the materiality of an actual book—asserting their *logos*. One of the first books given to players, “A Short History of Morrowind,” provides some of the first pieces of information that characterizes the Ashlanders.

This virtual text explains the trouble Imperials have in “negotiating” with the many native governments in place in Morrowind after Imperials “[assimilated the nation] into the Imperial legal system and economy.” Just as Ashlanders’ formal camps remain at the outskirts of the virtual landscape, Ashlanders remain on the outside or excluded from

Figure 17: How "A Short History on Morrowind" appears in game-space
governments Imperials deal with. Instead, the in-game text describes the nomadic Ashland tribes consisting of “raid settlements” that “plunder caravans, and kill foreigners on their wild lands” (“A Short History of Morrowind”).

Closely resembling the early ways Euro-American created the “savage-savage” Native identity, this initial snippet of in-game history serves as one of the only descriptions players may read before exploring Morrowind’s virtual environment. Early in a players’ experience with the game, the procedural rhetoric perpetuates simulations of Indian characters, “manifest manners,” consistent with previous mediums. Much like the cowboy hero venturing into the uncertain West, players, typically outfitted with means of offense, encounter procedural rhetoric that aligns with this particular piece of in-game history. On
the outskirts of *Morrowind’s* virtual landscape, groups of at least two Ashlanders will form camps and attack players on sight (see Figure 22). These encounters are unavoidable, codified into *logos* by the procedures of the game, prohibiting any peaceful means of interaction with these particular groups. Overall, players replay an American *nomos*, the story colonization, which eliminated Native peoples for added dominance and land, merely justified by the “fear” or anxieties of the savage simulated in literature. Therefore, *Morrowind’s logos* reflects Euro-American cultural power shadowing Native identities, and should players even suspect their own complicity, *Morrowind’s Indianness* ensures the elimination, or genocide, of any “actual” referent of Native peoples, even as they exist today.

One way Euro-American *logos* ensures such elimination is by the added distortion of the “Noble-savage.”

The game’s imagined Indianness truly echoes what Deloria explains as the post-structural Indian, or the floating signifiers that “[seem] to float suspended above the social
world of Indians and whites [...] generating its own cultural meanings” (167). This is explicitly accomplished by the conflation of various indigenous signifiers and the disconnect between the virtual Ashlander from any “real” culture, but also accomplished by the ambivalent savage-savage/Noble-savage binary. As explained through gameplay experiences and other books, there are many descriptions of the Ashlanders that seek to create a sympathetic or noble portrayal; how these portrayals interact with the way players complete enthymemes of Indian identities is even harder to pin down. Nonetheless, *Morrowind’s* ambivalent treatment of the Ashlanders provides the means to complete Euro-American half-truths about Native identity and culture. For example, even though Ashlanders may attack players on sight, later descriptions of Ashland culture and customs explain that they will not do so, out of a sense of honor, if the players go unarmed. Other explanations of Ashlanders depict further ambivalence. Ashlanders may also attack foreigners if they enter their dwellings unannounced, but could be forgiven (see Figure 23); in addition, lore describes Ashlanders as xenophobic, shunning all outlanders (see Figure 24), but could easily do away with xenophobic tendencies if provided a suitable gift or act of courtesy (Zainsubani’s Notes). Figure 24 shows how Ashland NPCs initially react to players; this particular war-leader “despises” the player and his or her “kind.” Ironically, *Morrowind’s logos* pushes Ashlanders despite being utter xenophobes, even though nothing stops players from walking in and out of yurts, near Ashlanders, or even in a war-leader’s dwelling—unarmed or not. In this sense, *Morrowind’s logos* actually fails to back up its own “manifest manners.”
Nevertheless, these fictitious customs of an indigenous people give no extensive reasons for their existence, enabling players to import varying degrees of Indianness or manifest manners from past media to envision either a more savage or noble Indian identity. Players complete their own cognitive perception of the Ashlanders depending on what recent media they have been exposed to. Therefore, players add to *Morrowind’s logos* which argues how players’ characters interact with indigenous peoples. More importantly, since open-ended RPGs have high “replay value”\(^\text{14}\), and since players seek out a different *nomos*.

\(^{14}\) A jargon term used often in gaming communities, “replay value” refers to the player’s ability to re-experience a game in a new way or discover new content.
with each play-through of *Morrowind*, players subject Indianness to further reconstruction and flux. Players get to become experts on what is Indian, and what is not.

After establishing some of the general ways *Morrowind* lore characterizes Ashlanders at large, an examination of the lore surrounding the four Ashland main tribes mentioned previously reveals a signification of Indianness that represents an inferior, fragmented people. Throughout the main storyline of *Morrowind*, as players try to gain favor from each Ashland clan, Ashland characters continually express their rivalry with other clans (*Morrowind*). The procedures of the game never show these clans caught up in warfare, but the distance between each tribe indicates that clans seek little solidarity in one another. Although the following chapter will examine the procedural representation of Ashland location more extensively, it is important to note that no means of “fast travel” exists between clan camps. Typically, players can make use of teleportation methods, ships, or a creature known as the “stilt rider” in order to navigate *Morrowind*’s virtual landscape quickly. In this case, the *logos* of the game deliberately fragments the Ashland people from one another. Such fragmentation not only reflects the effects of Euro-American relations with Native Americans, and serving as a metaphor and signification of Indianness, it simulates a lack of political agency. Unable to stand against the dominant, “civilized” political forces, as well as Imperial control, *Morrowind*’s lore and subsequent procedural representation of lore codify manifest manners of indigenous inferiority. Naturally, a hero must come along to save Ashlanders from their abilities—in particular, a hero that can truly “play Indian” as an outside savior. Becoming a savior further distracts players from the simulated social injustice that echoes Native peoples’ past socio-political struggles, and
deems them further exempt of any responsibility to their role in completing *Morrowind’s* ideological procedures.

**Main Storyline as Lore**

As only the third installment out of five in the *Elder Scrolls* series, the events of *Morrowind’s* main storyline become new lore elements in the in-game history at large. The problem with this is that by playing the main hero, players enact a procedural rhetoric which argues an Indianness of Native inferiority, characterizing the Ashlanders as being unable to save themselves and waiting for a foreign savior. Furthermore, players’ nomos and use of enthymeme warrants the codification of their own prejudices or conceptions about Native identity, likely from past “manifest manners,” into the lore or logos of the game. For example, in an *Elder Scrolls*’ community forum post, shortly after the release of Bethesda’s most recent *Elder Scrolls* game, *Skyrim*, players discuss “real-life” similarities with races in the *Elder Scrolls* in-game history. Players widely accepted that the “Dunmer,” or “Dark Elves,” have “influences from Mesoamerican cultures [...] as well as Native American cultures in general” (The Nexus Forums). In other words, completion of main storyline elements provide a vehicle for Indianness to become codified into a virtual logos that extends beyond *Morrowind*.

*Morrowind* inducts players into Euro-American logos of Indianness through the signifier of a dream and vision as the beginning cinematic. Such and opening mimics a spiritual journey only a consumer culture New Ager can think of, trying to fill the emptiness caused by “mainstream” Western culture (Aldred 345). A deity narrates this vision and ordains the player as a reincarnated hero, meant to save the Ashlanders from the coming
calamity, and reunite the tribes. Immediately, the game reduces indigenous cosmology to fictional elements of magic, denoting fantasy, while signifying Indianness. This is a new face for what Aldred considers a “new area” of cultural genocide since Morrowind sells fabricated (though convincing to the unknowing player) Native spirituality. Players get a sense that although their characters’ origins mark them as an outsider, they remain somehow chosen to be part of the game’s indigenous community, as well as their savior. More importantly, reuniting the Ashlander tribes would force out the colonizing and religious forces governing much of Morrowind. Although Bethesda attempts to portray a Euro-American, sympathetic view of Indianness by “restoring” the tribes, it still marginalizes their agency by creating a situation in which the Indigenous tribes cannot help themselves. Furthermore, much like Aldred’s reasoning for Euro-American’s infatuation or fetishized “Noble-savage,” the intentions of a sympathetic portrayal of a Native identity only distracts people from the real oppression and opposition Indian communities face (Aldred 341).

Again, the Euro-American ideology proposes a representation of the indigenous communities’ inability to save themselves from forces that mean them harm. Furthermore, the main storyline insists that the player’s character comes from a prison, from an uncertain origin and parents, which echoes and updates the cowboy and Indian manifest manners. Immediately, the player and its character emerge from uncertain environment, perhaps as an outlaw, into a land where he or she might become a hero or antihero. This beginning premise promotes a false nomos passed down from prior media, and marks Indianness as inferior or silent since in classic Westerns, Indians embody the primitive antagonists or the silent indigenous community on the fringes of the wilderness. Again,
players bring this narrative with them as they interact with the game, completing an example of Bogost’s enthymeme. Therefore, Euro-American narratives across mediums communicate to one another and recycle previous forms of media; as mentioned previously, these manifest manners live on within the *Elder Scrolls* virtual history.

In my synopsis section, I explain that players begin the main quest by working with the Imperials, unaware that at first, the Emperor only chooses the player to become a “Nerevarine imposter” (*Morrowind*). Out of all of the manifest manners discovered in *Morrowind*, this example and ploy emerges as the most insidious. Imaginably, using the privilege of a fake, foretold hero of the Ashlanders, a government or race characterized by their imperialistic motives could easily exercise further dominance. The Imperials intention reflects and justifies the ways in which Euro-American dominance or *logos* destroyed Native life, epistemology, and culture. Perhaps to maintain a sympathetic portrayal, players never become an imposter, but through divine right of one Ashland deity, players get named the “Nerevarine.”

By the end of the main storyline, while players are able to complete various side quests or guild missions, no narrative element or parameter in the game pushes players to any further meaningful interaction with the Ashlanders again. In many ways, the indigenous peoples of the game fade and remain unacknowledged. Such an indigenous representation is problematic for two reasons. First, Western players resolve Bogost’s enthymeme with their lack of knowledge regarding indigenous peoples; this is especially true for the younger demographic playing the game, since the absence of mainstream media coverage of indigenous issues validates the Ashlanders’ sudden lack of presence. Second, the Ashlanders could go unacknowledged for a player’s entire gameplay. As most of
Bethesda's role-playing games, the main storyline does not require players to fulfill it; instead, players can accomplish other side-quests and still receive positive reinforcement by gaining levels and becoming stronger. In the end, Bethesda falsely appropriates Indian culture and spirituality for consumer gain or entertainment value, which persists throughout the Elder Scrolls series.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

My examination of Indianness shows how Morrowind’s procedural rhetoric or logos simulates Euro-American cultural laws that protect, perpetuate, and justify “manifest manners” as simulations of dominance. First, floating signifiers perpetuate “notions” of Indianness, provided by manifest manners, into visual representations. These representations provide a means for players to easily manipulate fetishized notions of Native cultural traditions, and create a fresh experience with gameplay every time they visit Morrowind’s virtual environment. Second, Morrowind’s lore or contextual elements made up by race descriptions, in-game history, and main storyline elements, remediates former “manifest manners” or tropes from character and text. Furthermore, players’ ability to change Morrowind’s logos sets the medium of videogames and the genre of RPGs apart from other media. Players can add to Morrowind’s visual representations of Indianness, creating an Ashland identity that aligns with their notions of Indian identities, or one that suits their own nomos. For example, the user mod “Nangsid’s Taps and Rugs,” found on an online Morrowind modification database, allows players to add “Native American” designed tapestries to the Ashlanders’ yurts’ interior. In the same way Ward Churchill describes the problems surrounding “self-appointed” experts on Native cosmology or spirituality, the channels players can make use of to change Morrowind’s Indianness (like adding “Native American” tapestries to the inner walls and roof of yurts) creates a problematic space where players can dissolve a Native cultural identity continuously (Morrowind Mods).
Nearly over a decade after *Morrowind*’s release, a small group of modding developers, known as “Ornitocopter,” released the “Morrowind Overhaul 3.0” in October of 2012. Their mod not only adds content to the game, but more importantly, it updates the graphical realism of *Morrowind*’s virtual environment quite drastically. For many players, this provided a reason to play *Morrowind* again, and provided a closer emotional gap between graphical elements (or Indianness) and players. Despite additional quests and updated graphics, why the modding community and players alike revisit *Morrowind* emerges as a difficult one to answer. Players often praise *Morrowind* for the game’s “exotic and strange” aspects, but how much of that stems from being a fantasy-based game versus commodified Indianness is also difficult to measure ("Fallout and Elder Scrolls Fan Union"). Nevertheless, players continue to play *Morrowind* and engage with Euro-American “manifest manners” and visual signifiers of Indianness, packaged at greater immediacy,
creating a greater replacement for reality that overshadows real Native peoples and their stories or voices.

In the end, *Morrowind*'s procedural rhetoric or Euro-American *logos* shares similarities with Churchill’s “twin systems of colonization,” where the “colonizer” legitimizes the erasure of the “colonized” sense of heritage or history (Churchill 211). With this, *Morrowind*'s role-playing features allows players to virtually, and literally, “role-play” the colonizer, unwittingly or not. A whole generation of gamers, and more to come as mods keep gameplay fresh, have begun to shape the future Indianness, as well as legitimize it in the *logos* of game-spaces. Heightened graphical immediacy ensures the emotional immersion within Euro-American *logos* as it disseminates and multiplies significations of Indianness, and once consumed, immerses players into an ideological practice of cultural genocide. On the other hand, Native *nomos*, stemming from its own current historical and cultural context, could challenge game’s procedural rhetoric. Unlike the “manifest manners” that exist in film or literature, immutably bound to captured video or written word, games leave room for change. Even as another simulation, such a *nomos* could still turn Euro-American rhetoric of dominance on its head, and perhaps be one of many marginalized *nomoi* creating new spaces of agencies in video games. Granted, there is the risk of perpetuating the very simulation that masks the real socio-political injustices. Nonetheless, *nomos* closely echoes Vizenor’s description of “postindian simulations of survivance” as “heard and read stories that mediate and undermine the literature of dominance” (12). In the end, the ability to recognize or understand “simulations of dominance” opens an opportunity for the presence of the real, even in the simulated unreal.
WORK CITED


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