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Examining the Bordered Heterocosm of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*: Spaces, Boundaries, Transgression and Sociocultural Significance

Introduction and Conceptual Framework

The video game *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, published by Bethesda Game Studios and released in 2011, has been the focus of various critical analyses, of which the work *Being Dragonborn: Critical Essays on The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2021) figures as an especially relevant one, gathering numerous perspectives on the video game and relating it to existing scholarship and prominent issues across many fields of knowledge, from Narratology and Ludology to Medieval Studies/ Neomedievalism, Ecocriticism and Ethics. Besides inspiring interesting and interdisciplinary works such as the aforementioned one, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* is, firstly, remarkably recognised for offering players a rich and complex heterocosm, as Linda Hutcheon explains in *A Theory of Adaptation*, a world complete with aspects of a story, such as characters, events or situations and, in the specific context of video games, experienced through multisensorial activity and possessing plausibility and consistency of movement and graphics within the context of the game itself, just as narrated and performed worlds do (2013, p.14). With a compelling narrative, a myriad of distinct characters and a customisable protagonist, the Dragonborn, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* presents a vast array of possible themes which might be subject to careful consideration and research. The issue of borders, and the transgression of these same borders, is a prominent theme within many: be it physical, racial, political or cultural, boundaries and frontiers abound in the fictional universe of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. In this article, the Dragonborn will be addressed as gender neutral, since their gender, physical attributes, species, and race can vary according to the will of the player.

From a perspective of Cultural Studies articulated with scholarship on video games and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* in particular, the article aims, firstly, at summarising how in-game cities are constructed in the video game's heterocosm and how their inhabitants occupy different spaces within them. This glimpse into the social and cultural spheres and power relations which dictate and influence

relationships among the characters and ideologies portrayed in the game aligns with Dom Ford's view of the city in "Beyond the Wall: The Boundaries of the Neomedieval Town in Singleplayer Roleplaying Games", in which he argues:

[I]t is important not to consider cities solely as physical entities – a collection of brick-and-mortar structures – nor solely as a community of people, but rather the two in conversation, mediated by social structures of power and culture (2019, p.2).

Two major cities which the player's character visits, Windhelm and Markarth, will be addressed in detail, as will be the different spaces within them which can be regarded as heterotopias. The heterotopia is a concept developed by Michel Foucault in 'Of Other Spaces', published in 1984 in the journal *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité* (originally with the title 'Des Espace Autres'). The concept first appeared in a lecture by Foucault in 1967, which Edward Soja, a well-known urban geographer and scholar, mentions in his work *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (1989), stating that it presents an important reflection on modern space that takes into account its social dimension, *i.e.*, its consideration as a socially produced space, which acquires distinct forms as it develops over time (1989, pp.16-17). In 'Of Other Spaces', Foucault characterises heterotopias as external spaces which are related to all the others but differ from them by suspecting, neutralising or inventing the set of relations that they designate, mirror and reflect; thus, they function as counter-sites, representing, questioning and inverting cultural spaces (1984, n.p.). Viorel Vitureanu, in her article "A Critical Analysis of the Foucauldian Heterotopias", argues that Foucault's approach to space is, to some extent, related to structuralism, since the ideational determinant of the epoch in which he conceives 'Of Other Spaces' was the network itself (2021, p.128). It is, in fact, the network of spaces and the power relations which exist within and between them that constitute the focus of Foucault's thoughts on heterotopias (as Vitureanu also suggests, power is another one of the central themes of Foucault's thought, being inherently related to space, as "power is always 'spatializing' itself. It 'needs' space, both as 'spatiophage' and 'space builder': it occupies spaces, it creates spaces, it 'offers' [versatilely or imperatively] spaces." [*ibid.*, p.129]). This makes them extremely relevant when examining video games, not only from a perspective focusing on game mechanics and the hypertext – since these operate in a network basis, with hypertextual buttons allowing the player to interact with the video game's interface –, but also from a narratological perspective, especially those games "notorious for having a wealth of 'lore': a deep well of emulated mythology and history distributed throughout the games via in-game books, dialogue, the environment and so on", as Dom Lord characterises the *Elder Scrolls* franchise in his Doctoral dissertation *Mytholudics: Understanding Games as/through Myth* (2022, p.137).

By analysing the cities presented in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* and a number of specific spaces within them, it will be possible to understand how sociocultural, racial and power relations are presented in a deeply immersive video game, and how heterotopias denounce a myriad of issues which characterise the spaces to which they relate. Indeed, digital role-playing games (RPGs) have long served as a fertile ground for narrative experimentation and identity performance. As noted by Bowman, RPGs enable players to engage in complex processes of identity alteration and cultural negotiation, often within worlds that simulate – and sometimes reproduce – real-world hierarchies (2010, p.7-8). In open-world RPGs like *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, players encounter fictionalised races whose in-game social status mirrors real-world racial dynamics. These structures are not merely aesthetic, as video games can convey specific ideologies and perspectives, far from being artifacts devoid of legitimacy or cultural significance. This is a position compellingly advanced by Ian Bogost in *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*, who argues that video games possess a unique capacity to persuade audiences by shaping attitudes and beliefs about the world, thereby potentially effecting significant social change (2007, p.ix). This persuasive potential is made possible through what Bogost terms procedural rhetoric – a form of argumentation articulated through computational processes, in which the programmer, designer, player, and the game itself are all engaged in a dynamic dialogic relationship (ibid., p.4). Through this particular rhetorical mode, which outlines arguments through the scripting of behavioral rules, using various forms of programming languages (Pereira, 2023, p.157), the video game becomes instrumental in the redefinition, rediscovery, and deconstruction of inherited historical and ideological conventions.

Besides this, but taking into account these same precepts, the article also looks into the role of the Dragonborn to understand how they constantly transgress several borders of different kinds, occupy these distinct spaces and do not become an outcast, a role which scholars such as Chris Jenks and Julian Wolfreys, in the works *Transgression* (2003) and *Transgression: Identity, Space, Time* (2008), respectively, consider as inherent to the act of transgressing. Instead, the Dragonborn exists in all spaces at once, mostly exempt from negative consequences when supporting different and seemingly opposing factions and forging alliances of paradoxical ideologies and motivations. This analysis will demonstrate not only how the protagonist is capable of subverting the core dynamics of transgression, but also how they differ from the other characters, while still actively engaging with the surrounding environment.

Cities as Heterotopias: For an Understanding of the Fragmented World of The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

As previously mentioned, cities in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* are prominently meaningful considering their role in the whole of the video game's heterocosm, as the game arguably possesses an extremely rich semionarrative character, with an imagined society having its own myths of creation, communities, cultural conventions and sociopolitical particularities, comprising a multitude of NPC's (non-player characters) who may or may not physically remind humans and who establish relationships with and without the Dragonborn's intervention. As such, it is not difficult to grasp the importance of cities within this very complex context. *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim's* massive map, intended to help the player navigate an area of considerable size – the region designated as Skyrim itself – differentiates major cities from small villages and a myriad of other landmarks such as shrines, bastions or dungeons. For the purpose of this article, only the larger and most populated cities – namely Windhelm, Markarth, Solitude, Riften and Whiterun – will be considered, with a particular emphasis on the first and second of the list, as the introduction forestalls.

Regarding the visual representation of the five listed cities, it is possible to notice that these are all delimited by physical borders such as stone walls and iron gates, isolating them as a space (city) within a space (Skyrim) and distinguishing them from the woodlands and other communities in which wildlife abounds and intelligent or sentient species do not, which is, in fact, one of the defining factors for identifying cities in video games:

[U]sing visuals as an example, the player might be able to recognise a city as distinct from the not-city because the city has roads and buildings and is enclosed by a wall, while the not-city is a wilderness mostly devoid of organised human construction (Ford, 2019, p.3),

Non-diegetic UI (user interface) components and hypertextual buttons further deliberately distinguish cities from other spaces; in the case of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, the map which the player can access will present a more detailed city map once inside the cities, in contrast with the map of the whole region of Skyrim, once outside them (*Ibid.*, p.4).

However, before delving into the cities themselves, it is necessary to clarify that *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim's* universe presents the players various intelligent species and the most emphasised division is that between Men and Mer, the latter encompassing several elven races. However, there are two more species which are important to take into account: the Khajiit, humanoids with feline features, and the Argonians, reptilian humanoids biologically unrelated to Men or Mer.

Regarding Windhelm, the city is politically controlled by a faction named the Stormcloaks and their Nord leader Ulfric Stormcloak, and racial segregation characterises the sociocultural dynamic among the different species, races and social strata inhabiting the place. This is mostly evidenced not through physical violence but by the confinement of determined species and races within poor neighbourhoods or spaces associated with any stereotypical behaviour supposedly displayed each of these beings. The leader Ulfric fights under the banner of religious and patriotic freedom, moved by his hatred of a governing council known as the Thalmor, comprising mostly of High Elves (or Altmer), which maintains a concordat with the Empire holding political power in Skyrim. This concordat, having originated in the Empire's defeat during the so-called Great War with the Thalmor, although enforcing a new-found peace between the two parts, also establishes the ban of the cult of Talos, a hero-god worshipped by a considerable amount of Skyrim's population. A recruitment essay titled *Nords Arise!*, appealing for rebellion against the Empire, can be found by the Dragonborn, in the form of a book, in several locations, and it attempts to substantiate Ulfric's insurrection, stating:

Nords Arise! Throw off the shackles of Imperial oppression. (...). Be true to your blood, to your homeland. The empire tells us we cannot worship holy Talos. How can man set aside a god? How can a true Nord of Skyrim cast aside the god that rose from our own heartland? (...). The Empire has no right to tell us we cannot worship him. (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011)

Thus Windhelm and its people, governed by Ulfric, are inevitably drawn to this fight and its sociocultural, political, religious and economic implications. The city's multicultural population, however, have little to do with this power struggle directly, desiring mostly a quiet and safe life. Dark Elves (or Dunmer) are tolerated within Windhelm's walls, having taken refuge in the city after the downfall of their own homeland because of a volcanic eruption, but they are not treated equally as Men, causing a lot of suspicion as they are deemed outsiders in the midst of Ulfric's nationalist uprising. These elves are confined to dilapidated houses and have limited access to supplies and commercial tradings, while also being unable to communicate freely with other races and move through the cities' most busy streets, in a perpetual feeling of displacement and homesickness. In order to create a cultural space of their own and satisfy the need to preserve their traditions and sense of community, Dark Elves come to own a small establishment, New Gnosis Cornerclub, which functions as an inn, where food and drinks can be served, and where they can mingle with each other. Stormcloak guards will often present a specific dialogue to the Dragonborn concerning this place, uttering: "The Dunmer get their drinks down at the New Gnosis Cornerclub. Why they can't just call it a tavern is beyond me..." (*Ibid.*). This statement illustrates how the Cornerclub functions as a cultural space, where the Dark Elves establish borders to regulate access into a space they define as their own. They employ territoriality to defend a place they feel is threatened by outside forces which claim themselves as hierarchically superior,

possessing a military and economic apparatus that ensures their position of power. As Alexander C. Diener and Joshua Hagen explain, territoriality serves as a social mechanism which controls determinations of us/them, insiders/outsideers and in place/out of place, since these are formed, firstly, through unequal power relations within and between social systems (2012, p.6). Given Windhelm's sociocultural inequalities, territoriality functions as an instrument of resistance for segregated groups such as the Dark Elves, greatly disturbing the guards in the service of Ulfric Stormcloak, as they feel this alien cultural space can be a potential threat, since it is located within the city, which is a powerful cultural, religious and political space for the Stormcloaks (and also due to its strategic importance, as a heavily fortified city with an immediate access to the sea). The guards try coming to terms with this foreign space by assessing its function in relation to the city as a whole and claiming it should be regarded as a 'tavern' (see above), instead of the name chosen by the Dark Elves. By addressing it as befits their frame of mind and perspective, the guards are attempting to colonise that space by erasing the Dark Elves' cultural identity. The way guards evince their feelings points out to the heterotopic quality of the Cornerclub, which, by its difference in relation to the other spaces within Windhelm, exposes and denounces the discrimination felt by the Dark Elves and how their quality of life is greatly impaired by their limited freedom. As Foucault defines heterotopias, these counter-sites, are, effectively, 'other spaces', and the dark, dilapidated Cornerclub is, precisely, an 'other inn' when taking into consideration Candlehearth Hall, Windhelm's main inn, which offers comfort and warmth and is the first building seen by those who cross the city's gates. Additionally, the owner, Elda Early-Dawn, shows great contempt towards the Dark Elves (if the Dragonborn is a Dark Elf, she frequently utters: "Another Dark Elf, just what Windhelm needs." [Bethesda Game Studios, 2011] and "Maybe you should just move along." [*Ibid.*]), while taking pride on the longevity of the fire that burns in the inn's hearth ("Did you know that candle on the mantle hasn't gone out in over a hundred years?" [*Ibid.*]) as a means to present a justification as to why Candlehearth Hall should be regarded as a more important and hierarchically superior cultural space within Windhelm, when compared to the Cornerclub. The position of these two establishments in the city is also symbolic: while Candlehearth Hall stands on a slope in the middle of Windhelm, just past the main gates, the New Gnisis Cornerclub is almost hidden from sight, in a bleak alleyway, evoking, once again, the cultural presence and representation (or lack of) of these two spaces.

As for Argonians, another species, these can only be found in Windhelm's docks, inhabiting warehouses where several families are crammed into a hall, as the Stormcloaks undermine their intelligence and humanlike skills, associating them with reptiles; if the player chooses Argonian as their species when customising the Dragonborn, Stormcloak guards will sometimes state, as a reaction to them passing by: "Stay out of trouble, lizard." (*Ibid.*), using "lizard" as a derogatory term. The Khajiit, suffering even more discrimination, are not even allowed within the city's

walls, be it Windhelm or other prominent cities in Skyrim. If the player chooses Khajiit as their species, guards will often be heard saying: "What do you want... cat?" (*Ibid.*) or "Stay out of trouble, Khajiit." (*Ibid.*) in a contemptuous way. As a result, the Khajiit establish small settlements outside cities' walls, where they are able to trade with the player. Furthermore, they are forced to use their highly developed stealth skills in order to steal so as to survive. Since trading in city markets is forbidden for them, the Khajiit also need to resort to illegal drug trafficking, in the form of a substance known as moon sugar, which, when mixed with nightshade, allows for the production of skooma, a narcotic perfected by the Dark Elves and commonly sold by Argonians. This consolidates the marginality of these species, which, by not sharing the same freedom, social status and civil rights as Men in Skyrim, are forced to break boundaries in order to survive, thus resulting in more contempt and segregation from the latter, whose speciesist position – *i.e.*, the discrimination of certain species in favour of others – affects individuals of these marginalised species, even if many of them actually respect the rules and conventions set by the hegemonic social group. Oscar Horta writes that speciesism is not suffered by the species as a whole, but rather by their individual members, although this can often be confusing due to the fact that non-humans are usually disregarded as individuals, being considered, contrarily, as mere live exemplifications of a species (2010, p.9). This calls attention to the individual suffering of members of the aforementioned marginalised species, many of whom merely desire peace and quiet. Subverting these speciesist attitudes and distancing themselves from them, Khajiit will usually regard the Dragonborn with individual care and present them with elaborated and fervent well-wishes when interacted with and respected: "These sands are cold, but Khajiit feels warmness from your presence." (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011); "Speak. Khajiit will listen until all the sugars of the world turn sour." (*Ibid.*); or "May your road lead you to warm sands." (*Ibid.*). They will, also, make reference to their feelings of displacement in the region and how people refuse to integrate them: "The roads of Skyrim lead to many dangers." (*Ibid.*); "We are creatures of the Desert. The North Wind chills us to the bone." (*Ibid.*); "The longer we travel the roads of Skyrim, the more empty this land seems." (*Ibid.*).

Markarth is yet another city which presents similar dynamics to those seen in Windhelm. Guards will frequently urge the Dragonborn not to cross any boundaries, remarking: "Outsiders aren't trusted in Markarth. Best keep that in mind." (*Ibid.*) or "Don't ask too many questions in Markarth. Safer for everyone that way." (*Ibid.*). Upon visiting the city's streets, a tumultuous conflict between the Reachmen, an ethnic group native to the region in which Markarth is located, and the Nord race who governs the city, becomes noticeable, as well as forced labour in mines, particularly in the so-called Cidhna Mine, where the Reachmen are imprisoned and made to mine silver ore. Similar to the neighbourhood of the Dark Elves in Windhelm, Markarth also features the Warrens, a crumbling underground tunnel where the sick and poor are made to dwell among junk and even skeletons of those who have

perished. In order to maintain an impeccable image of the city and a distinct standard when it comes to beauty, order and safety, authorities in Markarth act as border enforcers, preventing the lowering of the standard and concealing poverty and upper-class corruption. Just like the New Gnisis Cornerclub in Windhelm, the Warrens can be interpreted as an heterotopia, functioning in a similar manner to post-eighteenth century Western cemeteries as described by Michel Foucault, since these present themselves as places which are: a) connected with all the sites of the city, state or society but remaining a place unlike ordinary cultural spaces; b) located in the suburbs, away from the center of the city; c) an other city (1984, n.p.). The Warrens share all these characteristics, being within Markarth's walls and, therefore, connected to the city, counting those who inhabit there as Markarthians; however, this tunnel is located outside the center of Markarth, concealing its beggars and, ultimately, functioning as an other city beneath the city itself. In this last attribute, however, resides the subversive power of the Warrens as an heterotopia, since this place exposes the social inequalities within the city and the condoning of forced labour. Just as the New Gnisis Cornerclub functions as a mirror-image of Candlehearth Hall while conveying a distinct sociocultural significance, so do the Warrens find their counterpart in the Temple of Dibella, a place dedicated to the cult of a goddess associated with beauty, love and art, and located in one of the highest peaks of Markarth. The Warrens, devoid of such beauty and the riches which adorn the temple, are located underground, creating a duality which exposes and denounces these inequalities.

Close attention to borders in Markarth is also evidenced by some specificities of the city: dragon encounters are a common random occurrence in all other major cities, but they do not occur in Markarth; similarly, bandits and vampires rarely attack the Dragonborn or NPC's and when they do, they usually do less damage when compared to other locations. This demonstrates how borders are watched over attentively by guards and government, and strict divisions exist, namely between the city and the outside world, the inhabitants who comply with social convention and those who do not, the rebellious races in search for social and cultural representation and established nobility, among others.

Lastly, and before delving into the specific situation of the protagonist Dragonborn, it is also important to note the issue of the Orcs, yet another race found in Skyrim. The Orcs (or Orsimer) are almost exclusively found in strongholds, in which they dwell and define as a cultural space of their own, indulging freely in the cult of Malacath, their chosen deity. Although the Dragonborn can enter these strongholds when travelling, it is only possible for them to communicate with the Orcs once proven that they can be trusted, by completing a selection of tasks or a specific quest (see quest: 'The Forgemaster's Fingers'). Once completed, the Dragonborn will become 'Blood-Kin' of the Orcs and will thus be allowed to enter and engage in conversation with the latter. Distinct from the Dark Elves and Argonians of Windhelm, which struggle to mingle with Men, or the Khajiit who resign themselves to a life sustained on small

scale trading outside cities' borders, the Orcs adopt a defensive posture, and their strongholds serve their need for a space of their own, with their traditional social hierarchies, religion and occupations, while simultaneously unsettling the power structures well established in the land, as guards of Windhelm will sometimes state: "I've no problem with Orcs. But that stronghold they've got in the southeast? Narzulbur? It's an affront to my people." (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011), demonstrating how these spaces disrupt a hegemonic one, and provoking the same reaction as the New Gnisis Comerclub and the Warrens.

A Transgressive Protagonist? Examining the Role of the Dragonborn

Taking into consideration this heavily bordered heterocosm, attention may now be drawn to the role of the protagonist Dragonborn in relation to city walls and other borders within Skyrim. The previously mentioned works by Chris Jenks and Julian Wolfreys offer similar definitions of transgression and what it means to transgress a border. Jenks defines transgressing as a "a conduct which breaks rules or exceeds boundaries" (2003, p.3), a violation which transpires in relation to some situation or issue (*Ibid.*, p.1), "to go beyond the bounds or limits set by a commandment or law or convention" (*Ibid.*, p.2). The individual who transgresses is, therefore, adopting a deviant conduct, moved, as Jenks states, by an idea which captures the imagination, that magnetises and touches the shadow side of individuals, as well as the fascination of sin, an interest in difference, envy and disbelief in the excess of others, a knowledge of or desire for the niceness of naughtiness, a loathing, a prurience, or a stalking mentality (*Ibid.*). To transgress convention is to indulge in these fascinations and fantasies, to deviate and defy established order and borders, to go outside them and become an outcast, a rebellious figure which does not occupy the space of convention anymore. Wolfreys definition is very similar to this one (2008, p.9), but the author adds: "transgression is always a motion that disturbs borders and the understanding of what is included and excluded by any boundary" (*Ibid.*, p.10). To step over these borders, "to cross a threshold" (*Ibid.*, p.3), as Wolfreys puts it, defines the action of the outlaw, the outcast, who dwells on the place of the illicit, beyond the commonly determined bounds of law, decency or others (*Ibid.*).

In *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, however, these dynamics of transgression do not always apply to the Dragonborn in the ways these authors explain it. This can immediately be noted taking into account the previously analysed situations in regards to Windhelm. Surprisingly, if the player elects Dark Elf as their Dragonborn's race, or chooses to directly oppose the Stormcloaks of Windhelm by forging an alliance with the Empire, they are not denied entrance within Windhelm's walls, and are able to use the many facilities provided by the city, as well as interact with the inhabitants (including notorious Stormcloaks). In principle, this should not be expected, since the Dragonborn is transgressing a border set by the political leader

of that space, whose sovereignty is known. The same occurs if the Dragonborn allies themselves with the Stormcloaks and visit the city of Solitude, which serves as the headquarters of the Imperial Legion (the Empire's military faction) in Skyrim. The protagonist is, then, always exempt from the persecution which other NPC's, with similar characteristics and allegiance as them, suffer.

Similar dynamics occur when several of the video game's questlines with seemingly opposing ideologies and/or incompatible endings are completed by the player when playing with only one Dragonborn during one playthrough. The so-called Daedric quests, a number of tasks performed by the Dragonborn for certain Daedric Princes (entities which inhabit different planes of reality and are regarded by Skyrim's populations as gods or demons), illustrate precisely this. There are a number of quests given by these entities, and some of them convey opposing ideas and have different motivations, sometimes of a dual nature. Hircine, for instance, is presented as the Daedric Prince of the hunt, the greatest game and sacrifice, being also the creator of lycanthropy; he reveals himself to the Dragonborn and sends them on a quest to judge a man, Sinding, who is, in fact, a werewolf (see quest: 'Ill Met by Moonlight'). Regardless of the player's choice – which will be between killing or sparing this werewolf – Hircine will always grant the Dragonborn his blessing, and claim their soul for his realm, the Hunting Grounds, stating: "You continue to amuse and impress. Go forth, with my blessing" if Sinding is spared (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011) or "My glories shall protect you from all this world's grievances. Good hunting" if Sinding is killed (*Ibid.*). Similarly and simultaneously, the Dragonborn can also complete a task for the Daedra Molag Bal, the creator of vampires, arch-enemies of werewolves; when completing the task, consisting of offering a NPC as a sacrifice to the Daedra, the protagonist is rewarded with a weapon and has their soul claimed once again, finding favor from this entity (see quest: 'House of Horrors'). There is yet another Daedric quest (in a total of fifteen) which makes the Dragonborn the new champion of Boethiah, the Daedric Prince of deceit, treachery and plotting, and arch-enemy of Molag Bal (see quest: 'Boethiah's Calling'). Not counting as a Daedric quest but featuring a Daedra all the same, the Thieves Guild questline (which offers the Dragonborn the possibility of becoming a thief) will branch into the Nightingales questline, during which the soul of the Dragonborn will be claimed by the daedra Nocturnal to serve as a protector of an entrance to her plane of reality, Evergloom (see quests: 'Trinity Restored' and 'Darkness Returns').

As the possibility of completing all these quests in one playthrough alone exists, the Dragonborn can be regarded as an agent of transgression within the spaces occupied by these entities. They reward the protagonist with artifacts or special abilities in exchange for the completion of specific tasks; however, the main objective behind the Daedras' deliberate interaction with the Dragonborn is ultimately revealed to be one and the same: to claim their soul for their own realm, or, symbolically and within the context of this article, to their own cultural space, shaped according to their wishes and populated as they see fit, since each Daedric Prince constructs their own

plane of reality. According to Jenks and Wolfreys, to cross and remain outside a conventional space will result in the individual who is transgressing becoming an outcast in relation to that same space, occupying now an illicit one. The spaces occupied and to-be-occupied by the Dragonborn, however, do not mutually exclude one another. As it is, this character is able to occupy all spaces at once, crossing several borders and sharing the particularities, traditions and requirements associated with each one, even if these convey contradictory ideas or seem to oppose one another in any way.

Furthermore, two of the best-known secondary questlines in the game – the Dark Brotherhood and the Bards College – imply huge differences of character and the Dragonborn can, once again, complete both of them. If the Dark Brotherhood questline is initiated and followed, the protagonist will assume the role of an assassin and, eventually, they will be asked to murder a noblewoman, Vittoria Vici, at her wedding in the city of Solitude, as a means to lure another target to be killed *a posteriori* (see quest: 'Bound Until Death'); additionally, this questline will also require the Dragonborn to murder several random characters, typically without considerate explanation as to the need of their death, or based in unassessed explanations provided by other equally random NPC's. At the same time, the Dragonborn can follow the Bards College questline and help a guild of peaceful bards retrieving long lost pages with verses from a famous poem, followed by aiding in organising a festival, also taking place in Solitude. If taken into account not only how prominently distinct these questlines are, but also the main one, where the Dragonborn is bound by a prophecy which dictates that they will save the world from the world-destroyer dragon Alduin, then their identity becomes even more ambiguous on account of the multiple spaces they occupy and the borders which they seemingly transgress. And, ultimately, the Dragonborn remains anything but an outcast. Even if the knowledge of their identity as an assassin is known, as is hinted at by several guards in different cities and villages and other NPC's, or if the player decides to initiate the Thieves Guild questline and their identity as thief becomes known as well, the Dragonborn is still allowed entrance in the cities and suffers no real consequences. It could be argued, therefore, that if the Dragonborn does not become an outcast, then they are not transgressing at all. However, if crossing a line, stepping across some boundary and overstepping a limit is transgressing, as Wolfreys states (2008, p.3), then the voyage in which the Dragonborn embarks is inherently transgressive. They constantly move past gates, enter the houses of peasantry and nobility alike, visit the headquarters of factions at war with one another, surpass natural obstacles, and cross the very threshold between life and death, physicality and ethereal body, human and bestial.

When crossing the border between these physical or abstract spaces, the Dragonborn is embedded with the symbology and identity of the previously occupied space, carrying them into the next space, and, when in this new space, they acquire their own identity, hence their deeply ambiguous and paradoxical character, shaped

by the numerous borders and cultural, political and religious spaces which make up *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*'s heterocosm, with different factions and social groups having their space well defined: thieves from the Thieves Guild thrive in Riften's sewers, with secret passages leading to a graveyard and underground chambers, blocked from outsiders; Nightingales, protectors of the shrines dedicated to Nocturnal and her portal to Evergloom, possess a dedicated cave named Nightingale Hall, and entrance is only allowed to Nightingale Sentinels, which the Dragonborn can become (see quest: 'Trinity Restored'); in the downloadable content/DLC *Dawnguard*, while vampires inhabit an island, the Dawnguard, an order of vampire hunters, has its headquarters in an old fort, and the Dragonborn can, once again, choose to ally themselves with one of these factions. The continuous movement of the Dragonborn through all these spaces, each differing greatly from one another, cements their agency as an inherently transgressive one. However, the dynamics which characterise the Dragonborn's voyage are presented in a peculiar fashion, simultaneously encapsulating, representing and projecting their ambiguous character, facilitating their movement without the repercussions faced by an outcast. This happens, in part, due to the Dragonborn's quality as a preordained hero, as Dom Ford suggests, stating that *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*'s protagonist's heroism is not aspirational, since they do not become a hero through training or strength of mind or will; it is, rather, an innate quality of the character, whose heroic being is recognised by their deeds, instead of the deeds being responsible for making them a hero (2022, p.138). As such, "the player's heroism is pre-assured and not contingent on what they do or do not do." (*Ibid.*). Additionally, Ford also denotes the unique character of the Dragonborn through their linguistic exceptionalism, a trope which is commonly related to heroes. Examining the video game's main quest and the character's distinctive power to make use of *Thu'um*, *i.e.*, the magical ability to use dragon language to form shouts which are immensely powerful, the author states:

Typically, the languages [heroes] know or have a unique affinity with are alien, ancient and lost. The hero is not usually someone who, e.g., uniquely speaks Spanish in a community in Denmark, but someone who knows a language which is in some way unknowable, lost, impossible or totally alien. [...] The Dragonborn's use of *Thu'um* marks a fundamental connection with dragons, and therefore with the prophecy's great evil, Alduin, who, as a dragon, can naturally use *Thu'um* also. In this way, the hero's linguistic exceptionalism is also a part of othering the hero. They are revered and championed, but also quite weird and a little scary. They are troublingly linked to the great evil. (*Ibid.*, p.145; italics by the author)

So, the Dragonborn's exceptionalism and heroism are, again, related to their ambiguous character, which is not only evinced through the linguistic aspect presented by Ford, but also by the aforementioned exemption from expected consequences when compared to those suffered by the many NPC's in the game. As it is, this may support the claim that the Dragonborn is, in fact, an 'elite', as is

suggested by Brent Kice, who points out that there are notorious differences between the protagonist and the NPC's, as the former experiences "the evolution of technology as they level up skillsets and learn to craft their own armor and weapons, experiencing their own technological prowess" (2021, p.49) and the latter are rarely subject to changes of this nature. The Dragonborn is, then, a truly idiosyncratic figure, who interacts with the open world in many ways – by receiving and completing quests, interacting with the environment and other characters, exploring, constructing, and other activities – retaining, throughout, a distinct and privileged status.

Conclusion

This article intended to demonstrate how *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* presents the player a bordered heterocosm that takes into account how in-game cities are represented, as well as the NPC's living inside them. By analysing specific spaces within the cities through the Foucauldian lens of heterotopia, the different power relations between various sociocultural groups are exposed, a pattern by no means remote from our own reality, and one that constitutes the very basis of the social systems inhabit from birth. As Selin Gülgöz states:

Children are born into systems of social relations characterized by power hierarchies. In the family, power dynamics shape relationships between two parents, between parents and children, and among siblings. At school, children are exposed to rules and power hierarchies, with teachers and principals formally identified as those who are in charge. Children's peer relationships involve intricate power relations, where even play is structured by dynamics between those who lead and those who follow. Power also characterizes dynamics between and within social groups, including those based on gender, race, and social status (2015, p.1)

It is not surprising to find these dynamics in a video game which, albeit fantastical, does not fail to grasp the many consequences of unequal power relations and the segregation of one group in direct contrast with the privilege hold by a hegemonic one, or the social acceptance of determined species or races to the detriment of others, an issue approached by Dom Ford who suggests that, although the video game's races are fantasy races which do not correspond to real-world races or ethnicities, (the Nords, for instance, clearly embody the visual trope of the Viking), they have a basis in a real-world ethnicity. The author comments, furthermore, that if Khajiit existed, the debate on race might indeed take on a different tenor (2022, p.141).

As was demonstrated, each social group, species and race fight for their own space within the cities in search of cultural representation exposing the many abstract and

physical boundaries within the game's world. These urban centres thus function as complex spatial metaphors for sociopolitical fragmentation and power asymmetries. Rather than operating as neutral or merely fantastical spaces, the cities of Skyrim reproduce and intensify real-world mechanisms of exclusion, regulation, and symbolic domination, with each being marked by a spatial distribution of power that aligns with broader ideological structures, reflecting a logic of containment that marginalises certain species or races, while consolidating the authority and privilege of others. As such, these spatial boundaries are not merely decorative or environmental, but are actively involved in narrating Skyrim's political tensions, cultural hierarchies, and historical trauma.

Given this deeply fragmented space, it was then deemed important to examine the Dragonborn, as the main character and the one through which the player is able to explore and experience the game, and understand if, just like the groups that create and/or inhabit heterotopic spaces, they are capable of transgressing, challenging and subverting the many existing boundaries. As was argued, by taking into account conceptual frameworks on transgression, the protagonist's voyage is indeed transgressive in its nature; however, the ambiguous and paradoxical character of their journey, which inevitably comes to form the Dragonborn's identity, cements their exceptionalism and different status when compared to NPC's, making them transgressive without really incurring in the consequences expected by one who transgresses, *i.e.* the one who is an outcast. As such, the transgressive potential of the Dragonborn, though seemingly vast, is ultimately contained within a system that rewards transgression without necessarily destabilising power. The player's capacity to shift identities, allegiances, and social affiliations is permitted only because the game's procedural systems anticipate and absorb such fluctuations. What might appear as radical multiplicity is, upon closer inspection, a design choice that prioritises ludic flexibility over sociopolitical confrontation.

Ultimately, this serves the players and improves their immersion and experience, as the appeal of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, as a RPG, relies greatly on its capacity to provide a highly customisable character, whose personality, motivations and background can be entirely imagined and chosen by the player. But there is, effectively, a transgression of the very core dynamics of transgression by the Dragonborn. As *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* features an heterocosm with thousands of characters, specific groups constituted by thieves, bandits, assassins, mages, vampires, vampire hunters (and others) are found throughout a massive open world. It is remarkably easy for the players, though, to associate specific spaces in Skyrim with certain factions, species, races or religious deities and, thus, for them to move their Dragonborn in and out of all these spaces. Typically, a cultural shock and clash would occur when the Dragonborn acts as an agent of transgression, and they would be persecuted, mocked or silenced. As a deviant and outcast, they could eventually find the means to stand up and resist. In *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, however, this course of action is not required, as the volatile Dragonborn is conceived so as to fit

the humongous diversity of the video game's playerbase, thus adapting themselves to numerous sociocultural contexts and, ultimately, the fragmented reality of our own world.

Future research could fruitfully explore the limits of the procedural flexibility which characterises the Dragonborn, by engaging in comparative analyses between *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* and other RPGs – particularly those that either impose harsher consequences for social transgression or constrain the player's identity in ways that reflect systemic oppression. Games such as *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014), *Disco Elysium* (2019) or *Cyberpunk 2077* (2020) could provide valuable counterpoints through their more explicit engagement with ideology, trauma, and the politics of embodiment. Moreover, a closer investigation into player reception studies – examining how diverse players interpret, reject, or internalise the representational politics of race and species in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* – might offer empirical grounding to the interpretive claims in which this article is based. How do players who have chosen the Khajiit or Dunmer race for their Dragonborn, for instance, perceive their treatment in Windhelm? And What does it mean for a Nord Dragonborn to side with the Thalmor, or for a female Dragonborn to lead the Dark Brotherhood? Such questions exceed the boundaries of narrative analysis and move towards experiential scholarship, where identity is not just theorised but also played.

Ultimately, this article argues that *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* serves as both a site of representational reproduction and of imaginative disruption. It reinforces many of the ideological frameworks it appears to subvert, while simultaneously offering players the tools to perceive, question and reconfigure those frameworks through play, as typical of RPG games with such rich game worlds. The Dragonborn's ability to inhabit multiple worlds without penalty reflects not only the game's design strategy but also the complex ways in which contemporary media constructs identity as a modular, adaptable interface between self and system.

Glossary

Aldmeri Dominion: A powerful political and military alliance led mainly by the Altmer (High Elves). The Dominion seeks to restore elven supremacy, often positioning itself in opposition to the Empire.

Alduin: A primordial dragon prophesied to bring about the end of the world. Known as the "World-Eater", Alduin is revered in ancient mythology, yet feared in contemporary Skyrim due to his destructive role.

Altmer/High Elf: A race of tall, magically-gifted elves originating from a region known as Summerset Isle. Known for their arcane proficiency and political dominance. Often associated with the Thalmor.

Argonian: A reptilian race of humanoids native to the marshlands of a region known as Black Marsh. Known for their natural resistance to disease and ability to breathe underwater, Argonians are often marginalised in Skyrim.

Bards College: An institution of cultural and musical education located in Solitude. The College trains bards in poetry, song, and storytelling, preserving oral traditions.

Boethiah: A Daedric Prince associated with deceit, treachery, and the pursuit of power through conflict. Revered by some as a source of strength and self-determination.

Dark Brotherhood: A clandestine guild of assassins. Bound by a spiritual covenant to a deity named Sithis, they carry out assassinations based on ritualistic contracts.

Daedra/Daedric Princes: Powerful, immortal beings from Oblivion, a plane of existence. Each Prince governs a distinct aspect of existence, such as destruction, madness, or ambition. Not worshipped in conventional religions, they are often viewed with suspicion or fear.

Dawnguard: An ancient order established to combat the threat of vampires in Skyrim. The Dawnguard operates from a fort and employs specialised tactics and weaponry to eliminate undead threats.

Dibella: Goddess of beauty, love, and artistry. Her worship is widespread, often associated with sensuality, aesthetic devotion, and romantic expression.

Dragonborn: A mortal individual blessed with the soul of a dragon and the innate ability to wield the *Thu'um* (Voice). The Dragonborn is prophesied to confront Alduin and possesses the rare capacity to absorb dragon souls, which hones their many skills.

Dunmer/Dark Elf: A race of ashen-skinned elves hailing from a province named Morrowind. Known for their resilience and cultural emphasis on ancestor worship. Many Dunmer reside in Windhelm as refugees.

Empire (The): Refers to the Third Empire of Tamriel, governed from a region known as Cyrodiil, and ruled by the Septim bloodline until its fall. During the events of Skyrim, the Empire is weakened, attempting to maintain control in the face of internal rebellion and Thalmor pressure.

Everglom: The plane of Oblivion associated with the Daedric Prince Nocturnal. It is a realm of eternal twilight and shadows, housing the source of the Nightingales' power.

Great War: A devastating conflict between the Aldmeri Dominion and the Empire, culminating in a controversial concordat. The war resulted in territorial losses and the outlawing of Talos worship, causing ongoing political tension.

Hircine: Daedric Prince of the Hunt, associated with lycanthropy and the predatory aspects of nature. He governs the Hunting Grounds, an afterlife realm for worthy hunters and were-creatures.

Imperial Legion: The professional military force of the Empire. Stationed throughout Skyrim to enforce law, defend against external threats, and suppress the Stormcloak Rebellion.

Khajiit: A feline humanoid race originating from a place known as Elsweyr. Known for agility, stealth, and a cultural association with trade and narcotics, notably moon sugar and skooma.

Markarth: A fortified city located in the western region of Skyrim. Markarth is a focal point of cultural tension between Nords and Reachmen.

Men/Mer: "Men" refers to the human races (e.g., Nords, Imperials), while "Mer" refers to the elven races (e.g., Altmer, Dunmer). These classifications are central to the game's racial and mythological divisions.

Molag Bal: Daedric Prince of domination, enslavement, and vampirism. Often regarded as one of the most malevolent Daedra, Molag Bal is responsible for the creation of vampires and seeks to assert his will over mortal souls.

Moon Sugar: A natural, magical substance harvested in Elsweyr, used in religious rites and alchemical preparations. It is also the base component for skooma, leading to its regulation or prohibition in many regions.

Narzulbur: An Orc stronghold located in eastern Skyrim. It operates under traditional Orcish customs and governance, led by a chief.

Nightingales: A secretive subsect within the Thieves Guild who swear allegiance to Nocturnal in exchange for supernatural abilities. Their role is to protect the artifacts and sanctity of Nocturnal's influence.

Nocturnal: Daedric Prince of night, darkness, and shadow. Patron of thieves and secret-keepers, she governs the Evergloom and is the source of power for the Nightingales.

Nord: A race of Men native to the province of Skyrim, and are characterised by their tall stature, fair complexion, and martial prowess. They value honour, strength, and independence, often expressing distrust towards foreign powers and non-human races.

Orsimer/Orc: A race of Mer transformed by the Daedric Prince Malacath. Known for their martial prowess and adherence to a tribal warrior culture centered around strongholds.

Reachmen: A cultural group of mixed descent, indigenous to the region known as Reach, where Markarth is located. Often considered heretical and rebellious, they follow animistic traditions and are frequently in conflict with other races.

Riften: A city in southeastern Skyrim, known for its corruption and as the headquarters of the Thieves Guild.

Skooma: A highly addictive narcotic derived from moon sugar. Its consumption is widespread among marginalised communities and outlawed in most regions due to its deleterious effects.

Skyrim: A province characterised by its harsh climate, snowy landscapes, and political instability. It serves as the setting for *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*.

Solitude: Capital city of Skyrim and seat of Imperial power in the province. Home to the Bards College and the headquarters of the Imperial Legion in Skyrim.

Stormcloaks: A nationalist rebellion led by Ulfric Stormcloak, seeking Skyrim's independence from the Empire and the restoration of Talos worship. They advocate for their race's sovereignty and cultural preservation.

Talos: Deified form of the mortal Tiber Septim, the first Emperor of the Empire. Worshipped as a god, but his veneration was outlawed, fueling civil unrest.

Thalmor: The ruling political faction of the Aldmeri Dominion, composed predominantly of Altmer. Zealous in their belief in elven superiority and responsible for enforcing the ban on Talos worship.

Thieves Guild: A clandestine criminal organisation based in Riften. Specialises in theft, smuggling, and extortion.

Thu'um: Also known as "the Voice", it is the ancient power of the Dragon Shout, allowing users to channel the raw energy of the dragon tongue into magical effects. Mastery of the *Thu'um* is rare and revered.

Ulfric Stormcloak: Jarl of Windhelm and leader of the Stormcloak Rebellion. A controversial figure who combines charismatic leadership with nationalist rhetoric.

Vampire: Undead beings sustained by the consumption of mortal blood. Associated with Molag Bal, vampires are feared for their supernatural powers and social infiltration.

Vittoria Vici: An Imperial noblewoman residing in Solitude, notable for her political engagement and upcoming marriage during the events of the game, which may be affected by Dark Brotherhood interference.

Whiterun: A central city in Skyrim, neutral in the early stages of the civil war. Whiterun is strategically located and plays a pivotal role in the balance between Imperial and Stormcloak interests.

Windhelm: One of Skyrim's oldest cities and the seat of the Stormcloak Rebellion. Known for its ancient architecture, harsh climate, and ethnic tensions, particularly between the residents and the Dunmer refugees.

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