

Monsters and Marauders: RPGs, Race, and the Sovereign Player

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INTRODUCTION

Videogames, particularly role-playing games (RPGs), often provide the player with sovereign control of the game-world. These games position the player at the centre of the game's narrative, giving them control over key moments and asking them to make ethical choices which impact the game-world. This paper is based on early work on a prospective study that will investigate, through close readings of multiple videogames, how sovereign agency often relies upon the existence of a racialized other over which the player can exercise sovereign power.

The notion of the player as sovereign (or, as exercising sovereign agency) has been explored by a range of authors: from the exercise of sovereign power in ludic acts of torture (Sample 2008) and the production of sovereign subjectivity in players through the experience of control facilitated by strategy (Vorhees 2009) and survival games (Lobo 2019), to the relationship between death and the 'sovereign empowerment' of the player in a capitalistic 'fantasies of adequacy' (Doohan 2023).

Following Doohan (2023), this paper understands sovereignty through Mbembe's (2003, 11) work on 'necropolitics', in which sovereignty is "the power and capacity to dictate who may live and who must die." According to Mbembe, race is a prominent factor in the sovereign capacity to decide 'who must die', which is connected to sovereign decisions about resource extraction. A common process in the gameplay loops of many videogames, therefore, is necropolitical: the player accumulates currency, 'experience', or crafting materials by killing populations. These populations are often racialized, and it is in pursuing this connection between sovereignty and race that this paper investigates the depiction of racialized 'others' in two recent RPGs: marauders in the sci-fi first-person shooter *The Outer Worlds* (2019), and goblins in the fantasy *Baldur's Gate 3* (2023).

Depictions of race in RPGs have a problematic history. These depictions are often traced back to Tolkien (Vossen 2020; Young 2016a), in whose work "race and all that stems from it is fundamentally a matter of biological descent" and predicts a "character's physical, mental, and moral capacities, as well as culture." (Young 2016b, 349) Early RPGs like *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax & Arneson 1983) "quantified into statistics" the fantasy tropes established by Tolkien, then becoming "'a boilerplate' that has been 'stamped' into contemporary games." (Vossen 2020, 45; see also Stang & Trammell 2020) This legacy has led to the perpetuation of "stereotypical notions of race, gender, and socioeconomic class" (Iantorno & Consalvo 2023, 7) in digital technologies. Essentialist depictions of race are thoroughly integrated into the history, design, and play of RPGs.

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In an early section of *Baldur's Gate 3*, the player has the sovereign power to dictate life and death, a choice racialized in a particularly Tolkien-esque way. A settlement of mixed-race druids and Tiedfling refugees suggest a complex racial politics that sympathises with the plight of refugees against (in this case) the druids' tendencies for isolationism. However, a group of goblins intend to murder the Tiedflings. They destroy settlements, indiscriminately kill, and cruelly 'play with' wildlife. The player can speak to the goblins, finding them capable of speech, reason, and emotion, yet they appear so essentially violent and cruel that they cannot be convinced to be *otherwise*. Goblins reproduce racial stereotypes as a violent, 'savage' racial other. Alongside this, the goblins have cockney accents, evoking an urban lower-class (Stein 2023; Kjeldgaard-Christiansen & Hejná 2023), which connect their representation to classist stereotypes concerning violence, education and self-expression.

In *The Outer Worlds*, however, the racialized other is less 'traditional'. The game explores class politics: in an early section of the game, the player encounters one population attempting to resist corporate domination. Within this class dynamic, the player is also introduced to 'marauders', a third group outside of the central class conflict. Marauders are violent drug-addicts who, hooked on drugs produced to make workers more efficient, have become indiscriminate and violent. Within *The Outer Worlds'* anti-capitalist narrative, the existence of a class of people suffering from addiction to drugs *produced by capital* is, however, mostly unexplored. Instead, marauders exist as an obstacle to overcome in the necropolitical process of play: the player's production of death and accumulation of experience, ammunition, and the drugs which can be looted from marauders' corpses.

It can be argued that, although these depictions are not overtly racist, they integrate and operate by racist logics. Marauders, like goblins, are 'savage', violent others. They are human. But their skin and features are covered, entirely, from head to toe. The armour they wear is a patchwork of dirty metal and torn fabric, with visors and breathing apparatuses on the helmets which cover their faces. Deleuze and Guattari (2021, 208) argue that racism "operates by the determination of degrees of deviance in relation to the White-Man face". Goblins are humanoid, yet sufficiently monstrous and 'deviant' for racism to operate in their construction *and in the player's disregard for their lives*; the same operation occurs with the marauders, who are depicted as humanoid-but-inhuman, 'savage', others.

This presence of an 'other' which conforms to racial logics uncomplicates the player's exercise of sovereign power. It is on the player's 'determination of [their] deviance' that marauders and goblins are made subjects of the player's necropolitical power as sovereign-agent.

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BIO

Sebastian Morrison is a PhD candidate and tutor in the Department of Media at the University of Adelaide. His research looks at social and economic critiques of capitalism in videogames, focusing on the limits of representational critiques of labour and class.