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LANGUAGE IN VIDEO GAMES: A TOOL FOR VIRTUAL CHARACTERIZATION OF
CHARACTERS IN ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

Diploma thesis

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Abstract

Video games provide an interesting and scientifically largely unexplored virtual space that reflects the popular culture of today, as well as its most frequent stereotypes. Since language is an essential factor of presentation and communication within video games, it is an easy target for categorization and stereotyping. A quantitative and qualitative study into sociolinguistic stereotypes was conducted within the virtual environment of the game Guild Wars 2. The quantitative method involved the analysis of linguistic characteristics of three races from the game that had the most clear-cut linguistic variations – the Standard English accent of the sylvari race, and the vocabulary differences between the asura and the skritt race based on the amount of nouns, verbs and adjectives used within the analyzed sample. The qualitative method involved interviewing six players that actively play the game in order to provide better insight into players' perception and observation of aforementioned races and their linguistic variations, as well as any negative and positive opinions they have of them. The results have confirmed the presence of these linguistic variations among the races; furthermore, the interviews have shown that the players create their opinions of these races and attribute positive and negative values to them based on their real-life stereotypes towards these linguistic variations – namely, they attributed higher prestige to the sylvari race and an overall positive opinion based on their Received Pronunciation, as well as judging the asura race as the more intelligent race than the skritt based on their larger vocabulary and language proficiency.

Contents

1 Introduction

Over the last five decades the video gaming industry has become one of the leading media outlets for popular entertainment. The booming development of video game concepts and gaming technology, as well as an increase in cultural values of interactive entertainment have given rise to a new and productive industry. The interactive entertainment gaming software provides a rich audio-visual experience that is hard to recreate in other forms of entertainment (Czech 2013). It is this audiovisual feature that opens up new opportunities for developers to create virtual worlds that may or may not follow real-world conventions. In this light, video games become a new form of popular culture media which exerts its influence, values and stereotypes on everyday players and members of the society. Unlike older forms of video games that followed a linear course of gameplay and a narrative focused on reading point-to-point messages that helped players navigate through the virtual environment, newer video games shifted their focus on providing the average player with meaningful auditory messages that nowadays not only provide them with navigation cues, but also help create a more vibrant and realistic environment within the confines of the virtual world. This involves the use of voice actors who breathe life into new characters, races and worlds. The producers in charge of the voice actors are, sometimes subconsciously, led by real-world conventions or stereotypes when providing the actors with a backdrop for their virtual characters, which inevitably entails further propagation of socio-linguistic stereotypes between players.

John Honey (1998) made a distinction between three different classes regarding the way a particular individual speaks; they are indicators, which are variants with little to none social significance attached and which may only be perceived by individuals with linguistic training; markers, which are readily perceivable and have social significance; and stereotypes, which are popular but imprecise generalizations of the speech forms of particular social groups. Such stereotypes are often applied to whole languages and often do not agree across cultures. This paper focuses on manipulation and stereotyping of two distinct linguistic markers, the British English accent and language competence between social classes, within the virtual world of a video game.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the presence of these linguistic markers within the confines of a particular video game – namely, Guild Wars 2, see if players perceive them and whether or not they attribute certain values to fictional characters according to preconceived

sociolinguistic stereotypes towards these markers. Finally, the paper evaluates the impact of these stereotypes, if any, on the general player base of the game.

2 Theoretical overview

2.1 Social identity and stereotyping

In order to explore the idea of stereotypes and how they come to be, we must first explore the basis on which we create them, which is our own positive social identity. Henri Tajfel (1982) defined social identity as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership". In order to gain self-esteem, we continually compare our group with other relevant groups in ways that will reflect positively on ourselves − this is an ongoing process with which we strive to achieve a positive social identity by differentiating ourselves from others. Such a process is a competitive one because all groups strive to be the superior one and requires a situation of mutual comparison and differentiation on a shared value dimension. This process of differentiation leads to categorizing in order to easily understand or simplify the world. Categorization reduces the amount of information to which perceivers must attend to, but associated with this simplification function of categorization is the likelihood of biased encoding and biased interpretation (Yang 2012). It is here that stereotypes, which are fundamentally subjective and distorted images of a particular group, arise. These stereotypes are not applied to specific group members, but to whole groups, and may be viewed as cases of metonymy where subcategories have a socially recognized status as standing for the category as a whole, usually for the purpose of making quick judgements about people. In other words, stereotypes form an image which is imposed on all the members of a given category, even if the majority of its members do not conform to the stereotypical image associated with it.

One of the categories through which groups differentiate themselves is language and it, too, becomes a target for categorization and stereotyping. Moreover, as previously mentioned, John Honey (1998) made a distinction between three different linguistic classes regarding the way an individual speaks; indicators, markers and stereotypes. These popular generalizations contribute to the overall hearer's perception of the speaker. Such stereotypes are often applied

to whole languages and often do not agree across cultures. If a choice of a particular linguistic stereotype leads us psychologically to a particular social category through the process of metonymy, it will also evoke the corresponding social stereotype. In other words, both social and linguistic stereotypes may be associated with social categories and work metonymically with respect to the category as a whole (Kristiansen 2001).

According to the study carried out by Giles (1971), the process through which speech style triggers social categorization starts at an early age of development. His study has shown that British schoolchildren use accentual features and categorization to ascribe value and rate speakers on a social dimension. This implies that different sounds, as well as other linguistic features, encode value systems. Speakers use various dialects and accents and these represent signals of the value system that they identify with (Honey 1998). Moreover, if a member of the group values the system of another group which they identify as more prestigious or desirable than the one they are currently in, the member will aspire towards the same values and adopt the signals that are characteristic to that group. As mentioned by Trudgill (2000), a sociolinguistic study conducted by William Labov in the department stores of New York City showed that there was a sharp increase in the frequency of use of the non-rhotic /r/ which has considerable prestige in New York City. This example illustrated that if a certain pronunciation comes to be regarded as a prestige feature in a particular group or community, it will tend to be exaggerated and overused. There is no legitimate rule which prescribes this feature as more prestigious than others, but there are possible explanations for this which may be amounted to stereotypes. Literacy is embedded in language. Therefore, standard forms of language, including accent, tend to be perceived as the only appropriate vehicles for education and literacy. "Educatedness" is closely associated with the notion of being "well-spoken," which seems to be common to all languages, and is especially associated with formal styles of speaking (Honey 1998). Therefore, usage of a nonstandard variety will either be frowned upon, ascribed negative value or simply viewed as inappropriate when compared to those groups that exhibit standard or "educated" language variations. The previously mentioned non-rhotic /r/ is one of the characteristic features of Received Pronunciation (RP), the prestigious Standard English accent used in the United Kingdom and the accent taught to non-native speakers learning British pronunciation (Trudgill 2000). As such, it is ascribed artificial value by members of other groups that perceive it as a desirable linguistic trait and will impose greater legitimacy and positive rating to those that use it. Moreover, Honey (1998) mentions that RP speakers are always held to rate more highly in terms of "status" and "competence" features

like intelligence, leadership, self-confidence, wealth, and ambition; while nonstandard speakers often scored higher than RP on the "solidarity" qualities such as friendliness, kindheartedness, integrity, and humor, but many also attributed trustworthiness to RP speakers, as well as improbable features such as cleanliness and tallness.

Similarly, these differences in social prestige, wealth and power are usually associated with the individual's social class – bankers clearly do not talk like busboys, while teachers do not sound like plumbers. They signal the social differences between them by features of their phonology, grammar and lexical choice. Class divisions are essentially based on status and power in society. Status refers to whether people are respected and deferred to by others in their society, while power refers to the social and material resources a person can command, the ability (and social right) to make decisions and influence events. Although the basis of the class system can be seen as an economic conflict between two classes – working class and the capitalist class, this has direct ramifications in the non-economic social areas, such as public opinions and standards, religion and status. These areas of life will generally reflect the ideology of the dominant classes. This is where the issue of language enters. Even though it has previously been mentioned that a given sound, sign or syntactic structure bears no intrinsic value (or relationship to class, for that matter), the social evaluation of language differences between people depends directly on differences of power, status and class. Once again, the clearest instance is in the notion of a "standard" which is inherently believed to be a "better" language variety, even though a more detailed inspection reveals that standard varieties are nothing more than the social dialect of the dominant classes (Guy 2011).

This statement leads us to an argument of Lippi-Green (2012), where she states that standard language is not a particular variety of English, but the ideal held by the collective which brings forth a series of social and regional associations. This ideology is further promoted by institutions in order to devalue anything that goes against the dominant values within a society. Furthermore, she suggests that sociolinguistic stereotypes present in children's animated films are not there only to entertain, but to teach children how to discriminate by associating specific linguistic variations to particular life styles and social characteristics. However, the use and manipulation of language variation in order to establish a character is a well-known and established practice in storytelling. Moreover, stage actors have been using various accents in order to flesh out a character by means of well-established stereotypes related with particular socioeconomic characteristics. Lippi-Green emphasizes that these shortcuts to characterization mean that certain traits need not be demonstrated by means of a character's

history, actions and an examination of motive – these storytelling techniques reflect deeper beliefs and opinions which may prove problematic and limiting (Lippi-Green 2012). According to her, the manipulation of accent, and language in general, is part of the storytelling process, and it works very well.

2.2 Video games as a vehicle for stereotypes – the world of Guild Wars 2

Animated films have proven to be fertile ground when it comes to language manipulation in order to convey a story. One thing that video games have in common with animated films, especially the newer generation of games, is the use of voice actors who portray the characters on screen. Although both animated films and video games can be set in real world locations (for example, Disney's *Lion King* is set in Africa, while the online role-playing game *The Division* is set in New York City), a large number of films and video games is set in fictional worlds with various characters that do not necessarily pertain to the human race. Developers may and will create cultural backdrops for these races in order to make them appear as real as possible, but this is where the notion of language comes into the picture. English is the *lingua franca* in video games, as well as the main vehicle of communication between players that do not speak it as their mother tongue, which opens up new virtual terrains for language manipulation in order to flesh out characters and convey their story.

This paper focuses on one language manipulation in a specific game – Guild Wars 2. Guild Wars 2 (2012) is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) developed by ArenaNet and published by Ncsoft; it takes place in a fantasy world called Tyria engulfed in a war against the awakened Elder Dragons that threat the races of Tyria. Although human race is featured in almost every other MMORPG, players in Guild Wars 2 are met with a plethora of races, most of which are unique to the game, and each is given a historical, social and cultural backdrop. Some of these races are playable and can be created as a player's avatar, some appear prominently during the storyline or in other instances of the virtual environment, some help the players in their quests, some are allies, while others are foes. Different races within this game speak differently, and although English is the *lingua franca* in this game and is spoken by all races, primarily because of conventional reasons unrelated to the content of the game, developers have attributed various linguistic characteristics to Tyrian races in order to make them appear real. In a simple overview, this section will describe three races from the game – the sylvari, the asura and the skritt, as well as any language aspects that differentiate

them from other races; their language variations will later be analyzed for the purposes of this thesis.

The sylvari are a young playable race of elf-like creatures that resemble humanoids with plant-based bodies. The race is based upon the Irish mythological aos sí, a supernatural race comparable to fairies and elves (Guild Wars 2 Wiki contributors 2016a). Their connection to the British Isles is not only tied to their lore – as mentioned by the former lead content designer Colin Johanson during an interview at Guild Wars 2 EuroGamer Expo 2011, sylvari and their lore are largely based on Arthurian legends and they "talk with a proper English accent" and "that is a big part of their character" (NVIDIA 2011) . In this instance, "proper English" mentioned by Johanson stands for British Received Pronunciation, the prestigious accent used in the United Kingdom and the accent taught to non-native speakers learning British pronunciation (Trudgill 2000).

Another playable race within the Guild Wars 2 universe are the asura. They are technologically advanced gremlin-like creatures that value intelligence above all else. As mentioned on the official wiki page of Guild Wars 2, "the asura have quickly established their intellectual and magical superiority over the other races in this fictional world and view them as useful primarily for heavy lifting, taking risks, and asking stupid questions" (Guild Wars 2 Wiki contributors 2016b). Unlike sylvari and their universal British RP accent, the asura are a rather heterogeneous group – there are instances where their voice actors use British RP freely, especially when providing voice talents to the higher ranking members of the asura society, but this is not always the case. As such, asura are not given a clear-cut accent but their voice actors do use the Standard variety of the English language. Since the race is presented as an innovative one, with various gadgets under their belt that are non-existent outside this virtual world and their workings are unfamiliar to other races within the game, it can be assumed that the storytellers wanted them to be the only race capable of understanding, coding and naming these artifacts. Technological advancement leads to the productivity of language – new machines require proper names. Therefore, the asura race and its members share a rich and complex vocabulary comprised of various neologisms that are nonsensical in the real world, but have meaning within the game.

The final race that will be described in this section are the skritt, a non-playable race of small bipedal rat-like creatures with a hive-like mind that were specifically created as the nemesis of the asura race (Guild Wars 2 Wiki contributors 2016c). They are poor, primitive and their intelligence is in direct relationship with their relative number – the bigger the group, the

smarter they become. Since they are at their worst when isolated, their communication skills and speech are also affected in those instances.

The three races were picked because the two prominent language traits mentioned in the theoretical overview were present in their language pattern – the sylvari use British RP, while the asura and the skritt reflect the differences in language that are rooted in class division. These traits could potentially lead the players to develop specific opinions towards the races based on their real-life stereotypes regarding these two language traits. Therefore, it was worth examining if a player's perception of any given race within the Guild Wars 2 universe was influenced by the race's linguistic characteristics, while also examining how players create these opinions and if they base them on real-life stereotypes. In order to do so, the language characteristics of the races under consideration had to be analyzed for clues mentioned above.

3 Methodology

The research for this paper was based on two methods – quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative method provides a statistical analysis of racial linguistic variations; moreover, the extraction of exact data which show whether or not the fictive races exhibit any particular linguistic characteristic which would then corroborate the aim of the qualitative method, which deals with the players' perception of the aforementioned racial linguistic variations and the subsequent stereotyping of variations by players themselves.

Three races were selected from the game Guild Wars 2 (build: 84172) – the sylvari, the asura and the skritt, and analyzed for their specific linguistic variation. The speech of the sylvari was analyzed on the phonetic level, since they were the only race in the game speaking in a particular accent. The asura were analyzed for their prolific vocabulary which is contrasted by the analysis of the skritts' poor vocabulary.

In order to find a large number of examples of one particular race, random maps and instances were visited during various times of day that contained a larger number of these racial characters. Various dialogues from various characters pertaining to a particular race that was analyzed at a given time were recorded and transcribed. These were later analyzed based on the race under consideration.

The phonetic level analysis included transcription of words and sentences that contributed to the overall assumption that the sylvari race did speak in a particular accent. In order to provide a more tangible insight into their accent, 80 random sentences spoken by both playable and non-playable sylvari characters in various maps and instances were selected and transcribed. These were later examined for words that featured two prominent RP elements – rhoticity and broadening of the vowel /a/. Words featuring these elements that occurred the most were represented in a table along with the number of occurrences in all of the transcribed sentences. In another sample of 80 sentences, I searched for discrepancies where voice actors used previously mentioned forms typical of the RP accent in one instance while omitting it in other instances. Possible reasons for this as well as the table showing these examples are provided in the results section.

The analysis of the asura and skritt vocabulary was conducted in an attempt to summarize the differences in their vocabulary depth, as well as the overall frequency of words used by these two races.

50 sentences spoken by the asura and the skritt were taken from random instances and maps. To avoid biased data, the recorded sentences were randomly taken from random maps with the highest concentration of members of a particular race. The process was repeated four times with different playable and non-playable characters to acquire a set of replicated data for statistical analysis. Three main word classes were chosen – nouns, verbs and adjectives, and words from each sentence were assigned to their respective category. Proper nouns, numerical, possessive and demonstrative adjectives have been omitted. Each word was assigned with their frequency count based on the information taken from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) (Davies 2008).

The data was used to analyze the complexity of the vocabulary that each of these two races used. The sum of the nouns, verbs and adjectives used by each race was analyzed. The results are shown in percentages based on the total number of words used in the analysis. For a more precise result, each word class was analyzed separately. To assess the complexity and frequency of vocabulary used by both of these races, the data was analyzed with their respective word counts taken from COCA. To avoid superfluous dispersion of data under the influence of more commonly used words of the spoken language, only those words in each category that were used the most were taken into account.

To conduct a statistical analysis, Statistica 10.0 software (StatSoft) was used and the acquired data was checked for homogeneity of variance with the Levene's test. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine whether there are any statistically significant differences between the means of overall data. Post-hoc Tukey test was then used to determine exactly which specific class of words differed. In the case of vocabulary complexity analysis, the data was logarithmically transformed to normalize the wide distribution of values acquired from word frequencies.

Along with the analyses conducted and mentioned above, six players were interviewed in order to examine their perception of analyzed races, as well as their perception of the races' linguistic characteristics. It should be noted that I found myself within the environment of this research, meaning that I have been an active player of this game and actively engaged in random conversations with the interviewees long before this research took place. I had had prior experience with the game itself which influenced the construction of the questions I asked, as well as their purpose, although I remained neutral while interviewing the participants and did not indicate the direction I expected them to go.

The players that were interviewed were between the age of 22 to 30. Two of them were male and four of them were female. There were three Croatian players, two British players and one American player. Throughout this paper, they will be referred to as players, participants, subjects or interviewees. If a particular instance calls for differentiation between the players, the three Croatian players will be stated by the codes C1, C2 and C3, the two British players by B1 and B2, while the American player will be stated as A1. The players were interviewed online via Skype software (build 7.27) or Facebook Chat computer application (build 42.0.0.14.114) depending on their preference. The introductory part of the interview consisted of several questions regarding their gaming habits and favorite activities within the game. The second part of the interview consisted of two games of word association. The players were given a list of several races from the Guild Wars 2 universe. In the first game they were asked to give the first word that comes to mind regarding that particular race which pertained to the visual domain, such as the aesthetics of the race, their appearance, armor, physical features etc. The first game was used as a warm-up for the second game and its results were not used in this research because they were considered irrelevant, merely as tutorial on what was expected from them to do in the second game. In the second game they were asked to give the first word that comes to mind regarding that race that pertained to the audible domain, such as speech, voices and sounds particular to that race, in order to see which language characteristic, if any, were perceivable by

the players. They were asked to comment on certain answers. In the last part of the interview they were asked about their thoughts on the voice-acting provided in the game, as well as their personal thoughts and comments on certain in-game races and their speech patterns. They were also asked to rate how pleasant–unpleasant they found each of the three races' voices that I analyzed, how much social prestige the voices possessed, and how comfortable–uncomfortable they would feel if they were to interact with such speakers; the last three questions were taken from the questionnaire constructed by Warr *et al* (1967).

4 Results

4.1 The sylvari

There are two prominent characteristics of British RP that are present in the speech of the sylvari race – rhoticity and broadening of the vowel /a/.

Words featuring the non-rhotic /r/ and broadening of the vowel /a/ that occurred the most are represented in the Tab. 1.

Table 1. Representation of the most common words used by the non-playable characters of the sylvari race within the game Guild Wars 2 that featured non-rhotic /r/ and broadening of the vowel /a/.

Non-rhotic /r/	
word and RP	**number of occurrences**
never / ˈnevə /	5
after / ˈɑːftə /	5
other / ˈʌðə /	5
dark / dɑːk /	4
nectar / ˈnektə /	4
portal / ˈpɔːtl̩ /	4
Broadening of the vowel /a/	

word and RP	number of occurrences
ask / ɑːsk /	5
answer / ˈɑːnsə /	4

There are certain instances where these RP elements are omitted by the voice actor where he or she opts for the General American pronunciation, yet he or she uses British RP in all the other instances. Tab. 2 lists the examples of words where these instances happen, sometimes within the same sentence.

Table 2. Representation of words where RP elements are both used and omitted by individual characters of the sylvari race within the same instance of the game Guild Wars 2.

Non-rhotic /r/		
RP (Received Pronunciation)	**GA (General American)**	**Character**
darn /dɑːn/	reports /rəˈpɔːrts/	Harvester Cala
guard /gɑːd/	wardens /ˈwɔːrdn̩z/	Harvester Eyal
ginger /ˈdʒɪndʒə/	never /ˈnevər/	Citizen
there /ðeə/	nightmare /ˈnaɪtˌmer/	Citizen
warden /ˈwɔːdn̩/	verdant /ˈvɜːrdənt/	Mender Aviala
prisoner /ˈprɪznə/	administer /ədˈmɪnəstər/	Caithe
Broadening of the vowel /a/		
RP (Received Pronunciation)	**GA (General American)**	**Character**
can't /kɑːnt/	last /ˈlæst/	Player character (sylvari)
dance /dɑːns/	nasty /ˈnæsti/	Warden Shield
task /tɑːsk/	after /ˈæftər/	Malyck

Players that were interviewed almost unanimously agreed the sylvari race spoke in a different accent than other races and recognized it as a British accent, with two of them attributing the sylvari race with the adjective *British* during the second game of association

where players were asked to say the first word that comes to mind when a particular race was mentioned. When asked how they noticed it was British, the majority of players mentioned longer vowels and the lack of /r/ in certain words spoken by the sylvari. The sole player that did not perceive their accent to be British was, ironically, a female British player, B1 in further text. She noted that to her "it all just sounds English", and although her main character is a female sylvari, she did not perceive her speech to be any different from any other race within the game, other than observing that her character "does sound clearer than other characters".

All the other players who perceived the accent as British expressed their annoyance at the voice talents provided, claiming the accent often sounded "fake" and "out of place". C1 and C2 claimed they did not like the voice actors used for the sylvari race, saying the accent sounded forced and unnatural. Although the Croatian players had negative opinions about the quality of the voice talents that were used, the accent itself did influence their positive opinion of the sylvari race.

The participants had conflicting opinions regarding the attitude towards the accent of the sylvari race. While some players regarded their speech as *regal* and *sophisticated*, others viewed it as *posh* and *vain*. B2 expressed its annoyance with them, saying that he's "grown tired of them" because "they sound like old people". Although B1 did mention she could not recognize their accent as the Standard British accent, she did say they sounded clearer to her and more eloquent than any other voiced race in the game. The three Croatian players that were interviewed all thought the accent itself helped shape the overall likeability of the race because it made the sylvari sound more *dignified*, *sophisticated* and *elegant*. A1 mentioned she felt biased towards the sylvari race because she is particularly fond of British English and thought the accent made the sylvari sound *intelligent*, *mystical* and "somewhat *distant*, but in a very positive way".

When asked to rate the overall pleasantness–unpleasantness of the speech variation used by the sylvari race (notwithstanding their opinion on the quality of the voice-over), almost all of the participants (excluding B2) rated it as pleasant or very pleasant. B2 was the only one who gave it a negative remark, emphasizing that he did not find it unpleasant, but annoying. All the players thought the speech variation carried a higher degree of social prestige. Finally, when asked how comfortable–uncomfortable they would feel in a conversation with a person sharing the same accent as the sylvari race, almost all of them answered they would feel comfortable or very comfortable (excluding B2).

The players opinions and their perception of the race are largely similar. Although some of them had issues with the voice talents provided in the game, the majority of adjectives that were attributed to the race were largely positive and some were repeated among different players that were interviewed; moreover, several players (C1, C2, C3 and A1) explicitly said the accent was one of the factors that influenced their opinion on the race and made them like the race so much.

4.2 The asura and the skritt

The results of the total sum of nouns, adjectives and verbs used by the asura are shown in percentages based on the total number of words used in the analysis (Fig. 1).
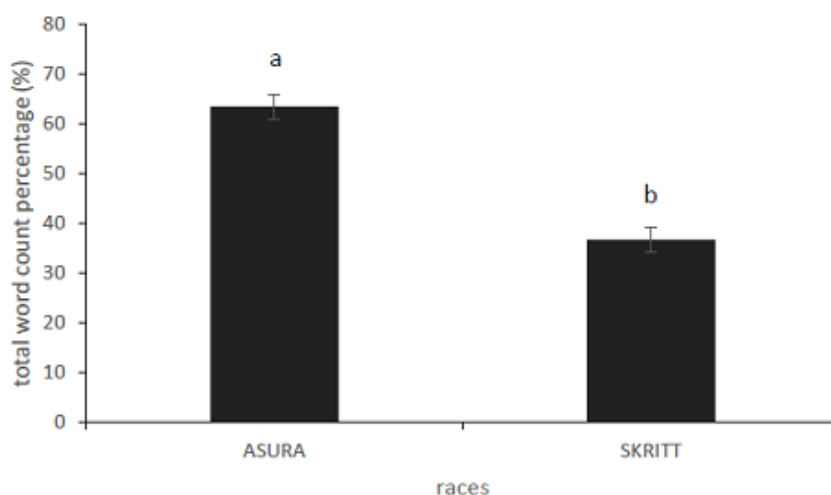

Figure 1 Representation of distinct words used by the asura and the skritt race from the game Guild Wars 2 within the analyzed sentences. Intervals represent ± SD, while statistically different mean values are marked with a different letter (one-way ANOVA, Tukey test, $p \leq 0,05$).

The results show that the asura had a larger amount of individual, distinct words within their dialogues and monologues than the skritt. It should also be noted that the skritt usually had simple sentences, sometimes consisting of only a verb or a noun with a verb, while the asura almost always had larger and more complex sentences, which often included neologisms that do not exist and have no meaningful application outside the virtual world of the game. The skritt lacked determiners in almost all of their sentences, while the asura made larger pauses within sentences.

I analyzed each word class separately in order to see if any word class was predominately used by any of the two races and find a possible explanation to their frequent usage. The analysis of each word class is shown in Fig. 2.
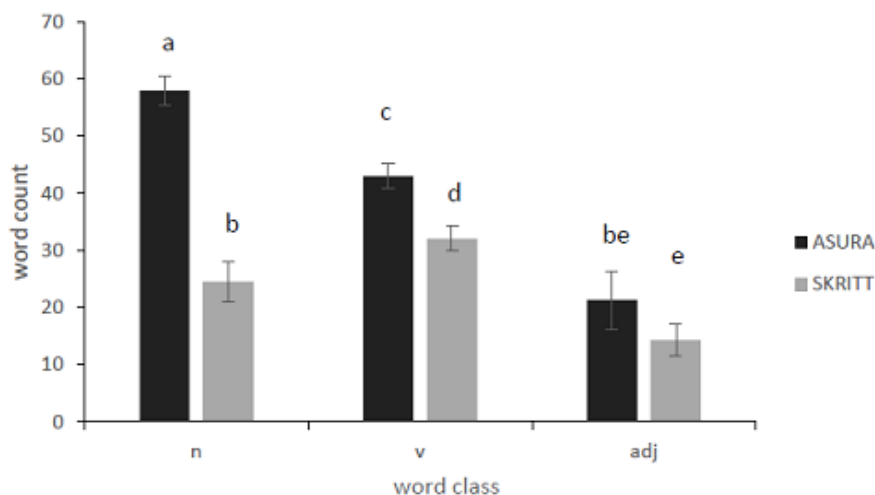

Figure 2 Representation of words used by the asura and the skritt race from the game Guild Wars 2 according to word class (n = nouns; v = verbs; adj = adjectives). Intervals represent ± SD, while statistically different mean values are marked with a different letter (one-way ANOVA, Tukey test, p≤0,05).

The results show that the asura had an overall greater number of nouns and verbs used in their dialogues and monologues than the skritt. The adjective column did not yield any statistically relevant results. The results also show that the asura dialogues and monologues had more nouns than verbs, while the reverse is true for the skritt dialogues and monologues – verbs are shown to be represented in larger amounts than nouns. The majority of verbs used by the skritt were in the progressive aspect.

The results of the frequency of vocabulary used by both of these races with their respective word counts taken from COCA are shown in Fig. 3.
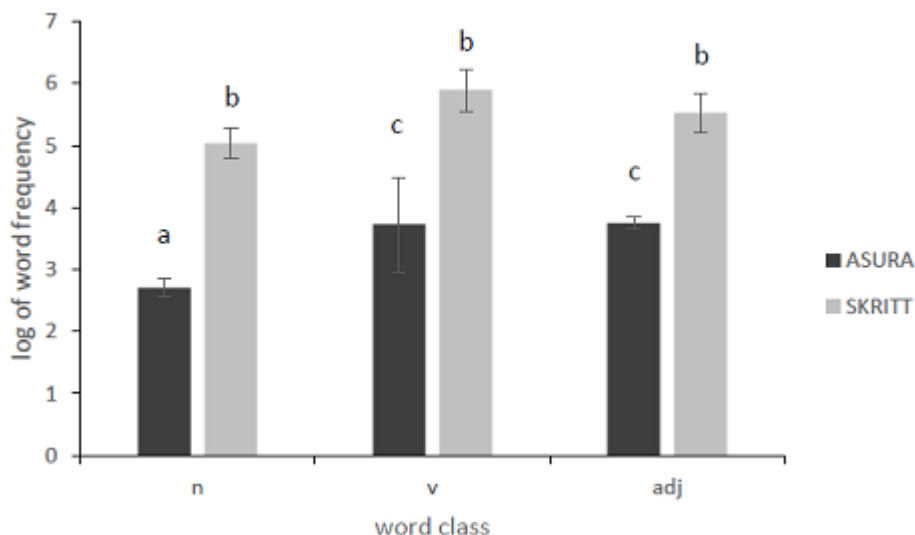
Figure 3 Representation of word frequency used by the asura and the skritt race from the game Guild Wars 2 according to COCA (n = nouns; v = verbs; adj = adjectives). Intervals represent ± SD, while statistically different mean values are marked with a different letter (one-way ANOVA, Tukey test, p≤0,05).

The results show that the skritt used words with a higher word count and therefore had more words that were more common and easily understandable. The words used by the asura were often archaic, they used phrasal verbs and sometimes had idiomatic expressions present within their sentences, all of which was not the case with the skritt.

During various parts of the interview all of the players had the tendency to compare the two races, the asura and the skritt, because they thought the two of them had a clear-cut distinction regarding their language variation, although the players mostly emphasized their rivalry within the game and mainly attributed their contrasting differences to this factor. The players usually said the asura sounded *smart* and *eloquent*, with C3 saying their voices *command attention*. B2 expressed annoyance with the way they spoke, calling them "*tossers*", because they always show off with big, flashy words. C3 did emphasize she did not always understand what the asura were saying or referring to when listening to their dialogues and monologues, largely due to the fact they were using neologisms that described various gadgets within the game that did not have any explanation in the real world, but she said she appreciated their cartoonish humor, witty remarks and scientific references that often had a comical effect. All the players noticed the asura had a rich vocabulary that also included words that were non-

existent outside the virtual world of the game and, although this did prove annoying to some of them, they all expressed appreciation towards this – A1 mentioned she enjoyed playing games where certain races have their own language or words that developers came up with and considered this to be a great feature because it enriches the lore of the game and makes the gaming experience deeper and more meaningful. The majority of players (B1, C1, C3, A1) thought the asura owed their language competence to the fact they were more developed than the skritt.

When asked about the skritt, the majority of players had positive comments about them – some stated they were their favorite non-playable race within the Guild Wars 2 universe. Some of the most common adjectives used for the race during the interviews were *dumb*, *shrill*, *stupid*, *simple*, *limited* and *oblivious*. When asked about the factors on which they judged their mental faculties, players mentioned their inability to speak properly, their poor vocabulary, their high pitched tone and the environment in which they live. All of the players said they sometimes had a hard time understanding their dialogues or monologues in-game, but they also considered that was part of their charm. In spite of their many shortcomings, the majority of the players viewed them as positive characters. B2 insisted that this was one of the reason for their likeability, and said that they are not stupid, but in dire need of help. A similar comment appeared during this part of the interview when talking about their language patterns – just like with the asura, the majority of players commented it was to be expected that the skritt had problems using language because they are technologically not nearly as developed as the asura.

When asked to rate how pleasant–unpleasant they found each of the two races' voices, the players almost unanimously agreed they found both races to be pleasant, although some of the players explicitly said they would not rate the skritt voices as pleasant in a real-life scenario. Other players said the skritt serve as comic relief within the game and that they would rate them poory if they were not entertained by them. They all attributed a higher degree of prestige to the asura voice-overs, with the majority claiming there was no prestige at all in skritt voice-overs. When asked how comfortable–uncomfortable they would feel in a conversation with a person who spoke like a member of the asura/skritt race, the majority said they would feel very comfortable speaking with a person who spoke like a member of the asura race, while most of them answered they would feel uncomfortable or very uncomfortable when speaking with a person who spoke like a member of the skritt race.

5 Discussion

The analysis of words used by the sylvari race does point out that the race indeed speaks with a Standard British accent (Tab. 1); some instances have proven that voice actors do transition from British English to American English accent (Tab. 2), though it should be noted that once they do transition from one accent to another, the entire word is pronounced in that particular accent, not just one part of the word. Considering the fact that the majority of voice actors who provided their vocal talents do not use RP accent in their everyday life and the sheer volume of auditory material they had to record in one take (GuildWars2Vids 2011), this can be attributed to a simple human error.

The first common theme that should be discussed is the players' positive perception of British English that directly relates to the positive perception of the sylvari race. Although half of the players that were interviewed were not native speakers of English, they attribute positive value to this particular variety because they explicitly relate the accent to the more prestigious group that is directly superior than theirs – for example, Croatian players and A1 relate British English to the Royal Family, well-spoken older people and sophisticated characters in films and TV shows. This can be attributed to the ever-growing trend of casting British actors in films and shows in order to appeal to a certain type of audience. Gould (1998) noticed that there is a certain snob appeal about a British accent people really respond to. Furthermore, he claims the accent bestows an immediate sense of superiority in culture and intellect, representing intelligence, breeding and refinement; in this way, the shows' producers and writers can signal the cues to the audience with minimal effort. The players who recognize these signals are not exempt from this rule. This generalization is then applied to the characters present in the game who speak with a British accent, which are then by default perceived in a positive light. Another possible explanation is that players associate these higher-status variants with undeniable social power of upper-class speakers which may be required for higher-status jobs and upward mobility. All of these are propagated by active agents of standardization in society, such as the media and the education system and apply a sense of overt prestige to these "standard" language variants (Guy 2011). One exception from this rule is B2, but his negative reaction towards the sylvari can be viewed as a somewhat rebellious one. Unlike the rest of the players who are either students or have administrative jobs, B2 is a blue-collar worker, and unlike them, B2 has no intrinsic need to climb the social ladder and appropriate other groups' values in order to reinforce his own positive social identity in relation to theirs. For members of the working class

with no expectations of achieving higher social status, such marked variants and accents may invoke negative emotions; furthermore, they may perceive them as snobbish or as an act of hostility towards their family, friends and neighbours, which are all part of their own social group. "Non-standard" linguistic variants used and valued by B2 possess social significance of solidarity – they give him a sense of belonging to the group, which individuals find reassuring; certain groups even view these forms as signs of toughness and masculinity, which may be valued by their members (Guy 2011). These negative connotations can be accompanied by emotional components (Kristiansen 2001), so his emotional reaction towards this particular variety shows his sensitivity to his social context and social category, and influences his opinion towards anyone who speaks with this particular accent, even if it is a contrived accent for a fictional race provided by hired voice actors.

The asura and the skritt have received rather positive remarks by the players, although they did have certain additional values, both positive and negative, attributed to them based on the way they spoke. The asura were all judged positively on their language competence and rich vocabulary, but it should be emphasized that players mentioned it was expected that the asura had a better understanding of language because they were technologically and economically more advanced than the skritt; this opinion more likely stems from the stereotype that those who are socioeconomically well-off have a larger vocabulary and better language competence than those who are below the standard. There are conflicting reports on this issue (Perkins *et al.* 2013; Fernald *et al.* 2013; Black *et al.* 2008); certain studies suggest children who live in families of higher socio-economic status have a larger vocabulary than children who live in families of lower socio-economic status, while others find no significant differences. When observing and listening to the skritt and judging their lack of language competence and scrambled syntax, players attribute negative value to their sentences because the apparent informational value is non-existent to them because they superficially judge the grammaticality of their sentences and do not take the conceptual circumstances into consideration when creating these opinions. The results have shown the skritt use more verbs than any other word class (Fig. 2). On a conceptual level, verbs denote relations between other conceptual entities, such as things, which are represented by nouns. Relations are conceptually dependent units and both relations and things are needed to express our thoughts. By themselves, these two notions designate a thing or a process; in order to "anchor" these notions with a situation and its participants within a particular speech situation shared by the speaker and hearer, we need grounding elements. By grounding a situation, the speaker provides

information about what or who they are talking about, when the situation happened in relation to the moment of speaking and whether the situation really happened. Modality and tense are used to ground relations, while determiners ground things (Radden *et al*. 2007). As previously mentioned, the skritt rarely use determiners; the results have shown they use more verbs than they use nouns, so there is no need for them to ground entities which they seldom use. They will, however, use modality and tense in order to ground situations they talk about in time and potentiality. In spite of their scrambled syntax or occasional omission of these grounding elements, these mechanisms help the players perceive the message conveyed in their dialogues and monologues. Although the players have a positive opinion on the skritt as a race because of their comical role within the game, they do have problems with the way they speak – the majority of the players said they would feel uncomfortable speaking with a person who spoke like the skritt race. The underlying issue here is the players' focus on grammaticality of their utterances, and not the message they are trying to convey, which leads them to believe there is a lack of informational value within their utterances, as well as comparing them to the "standard" variety both players and the contrasted asura are using. Players apply higher positive value to the code they relate to and find desirable, while subsequently having lower expectations and a stereotypical view of the contrasting code and view its users as unintelligent, even though there are no legitimate points that would prove there is a lack of intelligence involved.

It should also be noted that certain players went even further than attributing values to the fictional characters within the game. In some cases, players' opinion of a particular playable race influenced their opinion of players who play those races as their avatars. It can be assumed that certain negative values attributed to these races were so strong and in stark contrast with the player's group identity that they started to permeate outside the virtual world and back into the real world.

Video games, as any other form of entertainment media, entail their own set of generalizations and stereotypes that are set forth by the popular culture of today. It can be said that the overall image of the language used within a particular game is merely an interpretation of language by the lead producer or the main writer of that game, and not its authentic representation outside the virtual world. As Schiffman (2004) suggests, everyone is immersed in the "soup" of popular culture and their ideas and stereotypes may come straight from there. It is here that the players get to play a large part in propagating these stereotypes. Sometimes players may remain neutral to certain nuances in language variation within the game that were put there with a preconceived notion by the producers, but other times the players' perception

of certain language variations is very close or in line with those of a producer. In such cases, these stereotypes are bound to resonate among the player base.

6 Conclusion

The research has confirmed the presence of two types of linguistic markers within the virtual world of the Guild Wars 2 video game – the usage of British RP by the sylvari race and the distinction in language competence and variety among different social classes which was reflected in two contrasted races, the asura and skritt.

The players that were interviewed recognized these linguistic markers and distinctions and applied positive and negative values to them according to preconceived opinions towards these markers in real-life situations. Furthermore, their opinions of particular linguistic markers influenced their opinion of the races analyzed within the game – positive opinions of these markers helped shape a positive image of a particular race that used them, and vice versa. In some cases, these players shaped distorted and biased opinions of other players who had a specific racial avatar, applying the same values to both the player and their respective racial character.

The sources have shown that the developers of the game consciously used these linguistic markers in order to attribute certain values to particular characters, promoting language manipulation as a storytelling technique. If a particular stereotypical viewpoint promoted by the developer is strong enough, it will resonate among the player base who share a similar viewpoint.

It would be helpful to apply the same methodology used in this research to other MMO games on the market that use similar voice-over technology in order to establish how they reflect real-life sociolinguistic stereotypes and the overall impact on their player base. Additionally, more information should be gathered on how players build their opinions of other players based on stereotypical views of their virtual avatars.

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