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The Nerevarine Prophecy in Bethesda's '*Morrowind*'

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Abstract

'*Morrowind*', Bethesda's 2002 game, marries an explicit attachment to the type of free-form, gaming experience that allows for intensely personal character creation and role-play, with a rich and complex main storyline based on the theological concept of prophecy - the story of the reincarnation of the legendary hero, Indoril Nerevar. The interaction between these two aspects of the game puts Morrowind in a particular position at the point of interaction between theology and computer game design. By seeking to balance the competing demands of an explicitly prophetic main story with a free-form user experience, *Morrowind* produces an effective synthesis of both narrative gaming and theological prophecy in a new light which changes the common paradigm of both. This paper aims to trace and highlight the way in which this tension has been resolved within the game, relying on a voluntary understanding of prophecy and a distinct approach to narrative urgency.

Keywords

Morrowind, Prophecy, Pre-destination, User-created Texts, Free-form Gaming, Narrative

1 Introduction

> "Each event is preceded by Prophecy. But without the hero, there is no Event."
> Zurin Arctus, the Underking

The interaction of religion and the realm of computer gaming has come under increasing scrutiny in recent years, with innumerable articles published highlighting the impact on popular culture of religious themes and symbols in computer games (Bainbridge 2007), the importance of religious

tropes and metaphors in driving narrative engagement with the plots of computer games (Wagner 2011), and even on the usefulness of seeing computer games as a form of religious behaviour themselves (Bainbridge 2013). However, this prominence has tended to approach the issues of religion in the world of computer games from a broadly sociological or psychological standpoint, dealing with the impact that this religious imagery has on the gamer, rather than the way that the use of these theological concepts in popular culture, such as gaming, has had on the concepts themselves. In approaching the matter in this way, the relationship between popular representations and technical concepts can be more fully explored, seeking to chart the relationality between the two.

This article attempts to examine this interface by focusing on the relationship between the theological concept of prophecy and the design feature of free-form, or open-ended, gameplay in the computer game '*Morrowind*' (Bethesda Softworks 2002). Having only briefly been examined in academic literature (Hayes 2007, Kadakia 2005, Mallon 2007), *Morrowind* represents an untapped resource for novel ways of implementing strong narrative formations within highly non-linear worlds (Lindley 2005). By beginning with a brief exploration of the tension apparent between these two concepts, the creative tension and the synthesis achieved between them in the game can be exposed to scrutiny. While the tension is not fully resolved within the game, this exploration hopes to bring to the fore certain aspects of the synthesis that bear examination – a change in the use and understanding of the theological concept of prophecy, a change in the use and meaning of narrative in computer game design, and as consequence of this, a step toward a form of user created text (Turner 2005).

This aspect of narrative computer gaming has come under some examination in academia, especially from those considering the place and validity of describing computer games as narrative in form. While Ryan (2001) has identified ten characteristics of 'narrative' that fit well with common forms of roleplaying games, the move toward increasingly complex and detailed gaming worlds has left her last characteristic problematically focused on a singular idea of narrative, rather than the multiple possible narratives now possible even within quite simple, linear, games. By engaging with the way in which the design, and coding, of the game incorporate aspects of narrativisation and prophecy, this article also hopes to move towards a multiple exploratory framework that takes seriously the 'gamework' aspects of the genre (McAllister, Menchaca & Ruggill 2006).

2 *Morrowind* and the Nerevarine Prophecy

Released in 2002 by Bethesda Softworks (now Bethesda), '*The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*' is the third in the '*Elder Scrolls*' games series. Following on from the release of '*Arena*' (1994) and '*Daggerfall*' (1996), and preceding the release of '*Oblivion*' (2006) and '*Skyrim*' (2011), *Morrowind* marked a shift in design for the '*Elder Scrolls*' games, being deliberately both smaller in geographical scope and vastly more detailed than its predecessors, a shift continued to some extent in the games that followed (*Elder Scrolls III*: *Morrowind* Interview, IGN.com, 8th June 2000). While '*Arena*' spans across a continent sized game world, and '*Daggerfall*' deals with multiple provinces, *Morrowind* and the games released since have restricted themselves to highly detailed and free to explore representations of single provinces or self-contained areas of provinces. On release *Morrowind* quickly attracted critical acclaim for its detail, style of gameplay, and scope of ambition (Abner 2002), retaining a score of 89/100 on MetaCritic (MetaCritic.com), as well as selling more than four million copies (Bethesda Blog 2005). While criticised for its confusing levelling and journal system, and its drain on the resources of contemporary PC's (Brenesal 2002), a significant and active modding community[1] still exists on the developers official forums and has massively expanded the scope and graphical quality of the original game. This long term popularity of the game more than twelve years after its release can be seen in its continued availability on the shelves of computer game shops and its current availability through the Steam service (Steam Store, 2014).

Intended as a continuance of the type of roleplaying games that had formed the '*Elder Scrolls*' series until then (*Elder Scrolls III*: *Morrowind* Interview, IGN.com, 8th June 2000), *Morrowind*'s gameplay is a first / third person role-play set within a fantasy world. While restricted to the district of Vvardenfell in the Imperial province of *Morrowind*, the game is focused on an open world concept of gameplay in which the player character is free to roam across the entire 'map' of the game without hindrance. As part of this approach, great emphasis was laid on the creation of living landscapes for the game including respawning and unique wildlife, varied vegetation ecosystems, automatic day / night cycles, changing weather systems, and the creation of complex and believable cultural archetypes for the inhabitants of the game (*Elder Scrolls III*: *Morrowind* Interview, IGN.com, 8th June 2000). Gameplay broadly follows the conventional role-playing game (RPG) paradigm, with the player having the choice of certain classes and skills in order to determine their characters particular proficiencies – whether physical, magical, or surreptitious – and racial identity. A critical feature of the integration of this paradigm into the open world concept, is that while certain quests may be best suited to completion by a mage, this is no

1 Modding involves using the *Elder Scrolls* Construction Set packaged with the game to extend or change various aspects of the game. The community involved has produced significant amount of new material, effectively tripling the size of the original game.

barrier to their completion by someone specialising in a different class by differing means, and that the options offered have a serious impact on the way in which the player character created will best be able to function within the ludic structure of the game. *Morrowind* provides this by linking the player choices within character creation, which, as Lindley (2005) notes, are significantly greater in number and choice than are strictly necessary, and throughout the game, to social categories and identities formed by race, house, class and so on, in addition to a characters structural proficiency at killing enemies, creating potions, or casting spells.

2.1 Nerevar, Dagoth Ur, and the War of the First Council

Morrowind, though set in the same universe as the other '*Elder Scrolls*' games, deals with a prophecy particular to the island of Vvardenfell. Situated to the north east of the continent of Tamriel, the island of Vvardenfell is dominated by the active volcano, Red Mountain, which forms a central part of both the geography of the game and its main storyline. The prophecy of the main storyline relates to the death and reincarnation of the great Dunmer war leader, Lord Indoril Nerevar, who fell in battle with the mechanically minded and secular Dwemer at the Battle of Red Mountain, during the War of the First Council. While the Dunmer were successful in their war against the Dwemer, the exact circumstances of the victory and Lord Nerevar's death remain mysterious. According to the most reliable account provided within the game, during the battle Lord Nerevar and his companions entered the chamber of the Heart of Lorkhan, a recently discovered and incredibly powerful artefact. Once there, they defeated the Dwemer defending it, although suffering heavy casualties and wounds in the process. On examining the Heart of Lorkhan and the Tools that Kagrenac, a Dwemer leader, had used to manipulate it, Lord Nerevar entrusted their safety to one of his companions, Lord Dagoth, overriding his urgings to destroy them immediately. Nerevar returned to the surface to consult with his fellow councillors, Vivec, Almalexia, and Sotha Sil, where he was persuaded that the Tools should be preserved in case the Dwemer were to return from wherever they had disappeared to in the heat of the battle.

On returning to Red Mountain to retrieve the Tools, Lord Nerevar, Vivec, Almalexia, and Sotha Sil, were confronted by Lord Dagoth who refused to relinquish them, maintaining that he was required to continue guarding them against their plans. Unknown to the four returning councillors, Lord Dagoth had experimented with the Heart of Lorkhan in their absence, transferring some of its divine essence into himself and had become functionally immortal. Having been confronted, Lord Nerevar attacked Lord Dagoth and was thought to have killed him. However, Lord Nerevar was fatally wounded in the encounter and died shortly afterward.

While the circumstances of the conference between the Council after the Battle of Red Mountain, their return to the Heart chamber, and the actions of Lord Dagoth in the chamber, all remain the subject of significantly different in-world reports and mystery, the events following the conflict are clearer. With Vivec, Almalexia, and Sotha Sil being left in possession of the Tools of Kagrenac, they used the power of the Heart to turn themselves into living gods for their people, the Dunmer. Founding the Tribunal Temple, and re-directing the traditional worship of the ancestors and Daedric Princes, the Tribunal, or Almsivi, form the central part of the religious and cultural background of Vvardenfell during the time period in which the game is set. In addition to this, it has become apparent in the time since that Lord Dagoth, now known as Dagoth Ur, was not killed in the battle in the Heart chamber by Nerevar, but survived and has established himself in a position of power underneath Red Mountain in the centre of the island. His power, and the coming of the infectious Blight to the island of Vvardenfell, has led to the erection of the giant Ghostfence by the Tribunal in order to contain him. However, now cut off from the sustaining power of the Heart of Lorkhan, the divine Tribunal are weakening and becoming less able to hold off the Blight[2].

It is in this situation that the Nerevarine Prophecy comes to the fore as the game's main story. Related through various titbits of dialogue and written texts within the game world that the player exposes as part of the quest, the prophecy relates that Lord Indoril Nerevar will be reincarnated and return to *Morrowind* in order to defeat Dagoth Ur. Through the course of the main quest, the player character uncovers various prophecies which, once put together, explain the full nature of the Nerevarine prophecy. The first prophecies uncovered in the course of the main player acting out the Main Quest are *'The Seven Visions*' and '*The Stranger*'. While '*The Stranger*' deals with events leading up the Nerevarine's return and general aspects of his character and quest – the onset of the Blight, increasing ash-storms caused by Red Mountain, their foreign birth, and the opposition to be experienced from the Tribunal Temple and House Dagoth – it is in '*The Seven Visions*' in which the prophecy takes on a more specific form, relating seven key features or trials that the Nerevarine will undergo or complete before redeeming the people of *Morrowind*. Once the player has progressed a little further in the quest, a third prophecy is revealed, '*The Lost Prophecy*' which is broadly repetitious of the earlier two, though is perhaps a little clearer in nature[3].

The canon history therefore plays a key role in setting up the cultural and religious background of the world in which *Morrowind* is set, while the particular events of War of the First Council and its prophesied denouement with the reincarnation of Lord Nerevar form the backdrop to the main quest storyline.

2 For further information on this background, as well as accounts of the various different reported occurrences in the Heart chamber, see the UESP.net wiki particularly the lore articles: http://uesp.net/wiki.

3 The full text of all of these prophecies can be accessed either in the game itself, its construction set, or are available transcribed at the UESP.net wiki.

3 Characteristics of Prophecy

The centrality of the Nerevarine prophecy to the main storyline of *Morrowind* is not an uncommon feature of computer games more generally, especially within the role-playing game genre[4]. This reliance is both useful and problematic, as certain aspects of prophecy as it is commonly understood either helps or hinders the formation of convincing narratives in game development. The connection of prophecy to gaming has tended to focus on three facets of the prophetic model – its alignment to the classical form of the story or narrative, its ease of translation into a set and restricted storyline, and the ability for prophecy to be used to explain aspects of pre-destination (Florey 2012).

Given the finite nature of resources when it comes to developing computer games, especially those aimed to be complex and open to multiple playthroughs, it is unsurprising that these characteristics have led prophecy to be a recurring theme in computer game storylines – whether they involve the player character as the subject of the prophecy, or merely represent the broader background to the events playing themselves out around the character. This importation of prophecy into the narratives chosen in development allows for naturalness to be preserved even in the face of physical limits on game design, financial limits on the extent of development, or the narrowing of player choice within the game to certain outcomes over others. Prophecy, because of its connection with elements of pre-destination in popular culture and understanding (Boyer 1994), disrupts the jarring nature of artificial limits on the actions of a player character within a game by softening the edges of character action and gameplay interaction. If, as unfolded in the storyline within the game, a character is prophesied to travel to city A, then the inability to travel to city B which may exist within the background of the game, is less noticeable as the narrative flow of the game naturally points the players actions towards city A.

Prophecy, by its very nature, explains away otherwise artificial limits on the actions of the player character by playing on popularly received understandings of prophecy as curtailing an individual's action within the realms of narrative possibility. In terms of game design, this feature of prophecy offers up significant benefits for the coherent telling of a story within the limits of game design. The scope and depth available to game designers through either technical or financial constraints can be balanced within the framework of a prophetic storyline by limiting either the scope of player actions, the geographic extent of the game world, or the possibility of the interaction of the player with non-player aspects of the game. This balancing between the simulation level of the game, its provision of responses, whether narratively, haptically, audibly etc. in response to player actions, and its generative substrate of designer created rules and systems, is a critical part of the semiotic function of the game (Lindley 2005). While Propp (1968) has noted, the structural

4 Recent prominent examples include 'The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim' (Bethsoft 2011),' Farenheit' (Atari 2005), 'Tales of the Abyss' (Namco 2006), and 'The Legend of Zelda' game series (Nintendo).

substrate of more general interaction is understood as the space of possibilities implicit within a culture or community, the generative substrate in computer games tends to be much more limited than that of language and literature due to their containment within a set system of software, code, and set mathematical possibilities. While Lindley (2005) picks up on this, his characterisation lacks an appreciation for the extent to which intent within the game's constructed system can allow for a much looser structural substrate to the game, which in turn opens up the gameplay, and narrative, possibilities. Recent trends in game design towards sandbox and free-form gaming seem to be gaining ground on this conceptual basis, with some radically 'free' games such as Minecraft (Mojang 2011) and Second Life (Linden Lab 2003) proving popular hits.

While this aspect of the technological and financial limits on game design encourages the use of prophecy within the games themselves, there are other factors that make the theological concept of prophecy particularly useful for normative game design. The structure of most prophecy deals with a particular event, which is then foretold or predicted by the prophecy. This is preceded by a variety of pre-events which build up to the main prophesied event, following neatly the generic narrative arc, whereby the events described flow neatly from one to another with a logical consistency (Florey 2012). Prophecy, by filling in the 'ending', provides a clear path towards that point of closure that reduces the possibility for needless narrative deviation. In attempting to tell a simple story, often necessarily simple due to financial and design limitations, prophecy provides game designers with a clear, and restricted, framework of possible action that depends on the predestinarian quality of prophecy.

However, these aspects of the concept of prophecy also represent a problematic area of interaction with certain aspects of game design. While prophecy may indeed provide a clear linear structure to the narrative within which it makes an appearance, this structure is, by its very nature limiting. The limiting factor is undoubtedly useful in some cases; however, it often poses insurmountable problems to the creation of player interaction, immersion, and sometimes narrative possibility. One way of avoiding this is the rather cliché misunderstood prophecy trope, whereby the prophecy presented to the player or character provides only half of the story, or is to be applied and / or read in an allegorical or metaphorical way. This crops up in a variety of narrative mediums not just computer games, with the Harry Potter series perhaps providing the clearest example of a badly understood prophecy providing the impetus for narrative change (Lavoie 2014). This problem is the other side of the ease with which the use of prophecy as a narrative tool aligns to normative forms of storytelling. While the restrictions help the formation of a clear story, if the prophecy is too tightly worded or described, then these restrictions can make it increasingly difficult for the narrative to develop at all.

This balancing, between 'strongly' and 'weakly' prophetic models of narrative is a difficult one for the author or designer of any narrative medium. While this issue does crop up in computer games, perhaps the more significant impact of the use of prophecy in games of the genre of *Morrowind* is the impact that it has on the importance, or unimportance, of player action. If the narrative told within the game is too 'strongly' prophetic, then the actions of the player, even if playing the subject of the prophecy, can become unimportant to the flow of the narrative, as it has already been scripted by the prophecy, and, at one stage removed, the game designers (Mallon 2007). The appearance of importance for player actions and choices within role-playing games is often held by developers as a key factor in their attractiveness, allowing meaning to be provided to them through changes that become apparent either in the storyline itself, or in the game world within which the story is set (RPG Roundtable #3 Part 1, IGN.com, 20th November 2003).

Pre-destination is therefore a critical factor in the balancing of the freedom of player action and its impact on the world, and the narrative structure of the game. Allowing at least some freedom of action seems to be a required characteristic of immersive gameplay, especially that which aims to allow for role-playing within the game system by the player (*Elder Scrolls III*: *Morrowind* Interview, IGN.com, 8th June 2000). By allowing the player to choose their responses to events within the storyline, the immersiveness of the gameplay and the attachment to the player character is increased.

Prophecy in computer games therefore occupies a difficult position of being both useful and limiting, while also being both beneficial to the immersion of the player and possibly being a hindrance. However, gaming, and *Morrowind* in particular, faces specific challenges in producing this balance between 'strong' and 'weak' prophetic narratives given the particular game-play aims of its designers.

4 *Morrowind's* gameplay

The type of gameplay desired by the developers of *Morrowind* represents an exacerbation of the previously identified difficulties with the use of prophecy in game design. Two key characteristics of the game, geographic and narrative openness, both present specific challenges to the understanding of prophecy as being related to pre-destination and a certain, fixed, storyline.

Morrowind was deliberately created with a focus on allowing the player to both go anywhere within the game-world at any time, and to act in any way within the limits of the game engine (*Elder Scrolls III*: *Morrowind* Interview, IGN.com, 8th June 2000). This means, for example, that the player character is perfectly able to explore the whole of the map right from the very beginning of

the game, jumping onto house rooftops, entering high-level dungeons, getting lost in the wilderness, with none of the more typical linear geographical progression seen even in other roleplaying games. This approach offers significant benefits to the game, allowing for a deeper and more realistic presentation of the setting and freeing up player action to begin the creation of narrative within the game. Exploration, particularly aimless exploration, of the beautiful game world is highly encouraged within the game through quests which take the player outside of the main cities and through the scattering of various caves, mines, and dungeons which have no relation to any particular quest across the map but are there purely to reward and entertain the exploring character. While this does pose problems in connection to gameplay and the context of prophecy, it is an intrinsic part of the designers aim in creating *Morrowind* the way it is. As Rolston (Oblivion's Ken Rolston Speaks, Hard OCP.com, May 23rd 2006) has said in discussing the relationship of the main quest to the free-form nature of the gameplay:

> It is my profoundest hope that while advancing along the main quest line, you will find some story YOU want to tell about yourself, or some aspect of the world YOU want to explore, and turn at right angles to the main quest narrative and march off on your own.

While it is perfectly possible for a newly created (and very weak) character to fully explore all areas of the map of Vvardenfell contained in the game, realistically this would be incredibly difficult to accomplish without continually dying. *Morrowind* uses a mix of both specific creature placement and levelled list creature placement in order to represent various degrees of difficulty for the player character in completing the various quests available. This means that in places the creatures that appear are likely to be far ahead of a new player character in power, thereby indirectly restricting access to certain areas before a certain character level has been reached, however this restriction is not a hard, or artificial restriction, and plays toward making the actions of the player determine the possibility for exploration rather than heavy handed game design artificially limiting player action.

The goal of geographic openness aimed for by *Morrowind*'s developers naturally represents a challenge to the prophetic model used as part of its main story. While open exploration is encouraged, this poses difficulties for the developers in keeping certain parts of the unfolding prophecy hidden from the player before the appropriate time, and causes problems to the ease with which *Morrowind* can be picked up by new players. A common complaint found on the game's official forum and elsewhere is the ease with which new characters die while exploring the countryside through stumbling onto a randomly spawned creature that is too powerful for them to handle[5]. Although this complaint is partly down to the way in which *Morrowind*'s combat and

5 This has spawned innumerable darkly humorous player threads expressing extreme frustration at either dying to rats, or being unable to kill rats, right at the beginning of the game. These can be found across the internet, but seem to be particularly numerous at larger gaming forums such as Bethsoft's own official ones, the Steam forums, and

levelling system works, it is also an unavoidable side effect of the way in which the game developers have chosen to build the game.

In tandem with the geographical openness desired by the game developers, *Morrowind* also places a strong emphasis on narrative, or player action, openness. By this I mean the possibility for the player to do anything within the physical or design limits of the game world. For example, it is perfectly easy to interrupt quests by completing them early or by a different method than the 'correct' one, to pick up and leave off on quest arcs as desired, or to kill any non-player character within the game that you desire (*Elder Scrolls III*: *Morrowind* Interview, IGN.com, 8th June 2000). This option of killing anyone within the game, even very important characters to the main plot such as the Tribunal member, Vivec, posed significant difficulties for the development team as it required a significant extension of the possible dialogue and quest options implemented into the game (K. Rolston, cited in Turner 2005) but was used as a way of opening up player choice within the performance of their character in the game.

As a particular characteristic of roleplaying games such as *Morrowind*, this internal-ontological interactivity (Ryan 2001) promotes narrative plurality, and re-playability, by offering multiple different narrative and experiences within the game system on each play through. The interaction promoted between the game world and the player, the reflexivity involved in its narrative adjustment to the actions of the player character, forms novel 'pathways' through the jumble of possible narratives contained within the designed and coded structural substrate of the game. *Morrowind*'s particular game play style encourages this in two ways, first through the deep identification of the gamer with their player character through the immersive cultural and social world built up within the texts of the game, forming a strong narrative identity for the character being played. This narrative identity, formed dramatically through the players actions, rather than diegetically, through the game's own narration, represents a step towards both plural narratives within a single medium, as well as a step toward the kind of user-created narrative suggested by Ryan in her discussion of the holodeck and Aleph (Ryan 2001). Second to this, *Morrowind* incorporates both halves of Mallon's taxonomy of agency within the one game (Mallon 2007), providing game aspects within which the gamer feels agency in their actions, such as choices regarding quests and factions, but also incorporating game mechanisms which encourage and promote that aspect of agency, through the reflexivity of the world to the players choices, perhaps best represented by the conflicts that become apparent once a player joins a faction and completes quests for them. For example, the reaction of members of the Tribunal Temple changes for the worse once a player character becomes a senior member of the rival Imperial Cult, or joining House Telvanni causes members of the Mages Guild be less likely to offer the player character services or

GameFAQs.com.

information[6], providing the choices made and actions performed by the player character with real and meaningful consequences, and, as Kadakia has found (Kadakia 2005), driving engagement with the game.

This feature of the game poses an almost insurmountable problem for a prophetic narrative model. While the radical extension of player choice, and player impact on the world, provides the individual with greater engagement in the narrative, the nature of prophecy, foretelling set events which involve set people and places, forecloses the possibilities which still make narrative sense. If a prophecy foretells the involvement of a particular person in a particularly event, it is quite a stretch to reconcile their appearance and their death at the hands of the player in a way in which makes narrative sense. Allowing the user or player as much freedom of action as *Morrowind* does in creating their own text, or narrative, places strains on the designed text of the game both technologically and narratively. This tension between the developer created text and the player created text of the game is the point at which *Morrowind*'s particular synthesis informs and changes the theological notion of prophecy in order to resolve the tension. In doing so, a balance is struck between the prophetic narrative and the player narrative, between the designer's text and the players' text.

5 *Morrowind's* approach to narrative

Morrowind's approach to narrative, loosely defined, provides the grounds on which the synthesis of the prophetic narrative and the player narrative can be created within the restriction of the game. *Morrowind* approaches the difficulty of reconciling the ability for the player to create their own narrative and the narrative provided for the game world through the game designers work by implementing the main narrative in such a way that the main narrative and its subsidiary narratives are themselves not necessary to the playing of the game, and by allowing the player choice of following the main quest narrative or not to itself become part of the creation of the player centred narrative. As the main developer of *Morrowind*, Ken Rolston (Oblivion's Ken Rolston Speaks, Hard OCP.com, May 23rd 2006), has noted this allowing of the player to create their own narrative within the game provides a greater scope to the narrative possibilities, but also represents one of the weaknesses of the game – the creation of a narrative by the player is much more difficult and time consuming than the consumption of a pre-written and well defined one.

6 These reactive factions are most extensively detailed at the UESP.net wiki.

While it is normal in roleplaying computer games to foreground the main quest either by not offering any alternatives to its completion, or by having it continuously impinge on the player's experience of the game, *Morrowind* takes a different approach. On creating a character, the player arrives on the coast of *Morrowind* in the town of Seyda Neen, a small Imperial outpost on the island of Vvardenfell. Once the player has completed the character creation process (choosing particular classes, star sign, proficiencies etc.) they are given a coded document and told to deliver to it a man called Caius Cosades in the town of Balmora. However, as soon as the player steps out of the character creation office there are no further prompts to complete or even engage with the main quest at all. It is perfectly possible to never complete this beginning part of the main quest, even selling the package on to a merchant or dropping it in the middle of the road, and to continue playing the game without reference to the main quest – completing subsidiary faction quests, or quests connected to particular cities, or ignoring quests altogether and simply exploring the hundreds of caves, caverns, tombs, and mines scattered across the landscape. Indeed a running joke among players of the game is that a great number of new players may never even realise that the main quest exists at all, simply forgetting the original package and playing through as the mood takes them. This was identified in some reviews (Abner 2002), and by the game's creator (Oblivion's Ken Rolston Speaks, Hard OCP.com, May 23rd 2006), as a critical weakness of *Morrowind* as a popular game – its lack of clearly foregrounded narrative meant that the player had to do more work to create the narrative or to engage with it, while the sheer variety of quest choices available proved confusing or dazing to player expecting a more straight forward dungeon romp.

This approach to integrating the main quest into the broader player created narrative is relatively unique among computer games, especially those in the role-plying genre. By leaving the player's engagement with the main quest narrative purely up to the choice of the player, agency is added to its inclusion – without the agency of the player, the main quest narrative effectively disappears from the player created narrative, only returning when and where the player wishes it to. This creates agency in the choice of whether to engage with the main quest, and allows for the creation of moral choice in the actions of the player. As Svelch (2010) notes this moral identification by the player with their player character is a critical part of the construction of meaning within the actions of the player character.

In working in this way, the narrative of the game experienced by the player is created by the player through their actions, a particularly effective methodology for the promotion of immersion and meaning for the player, as well as a unique take on the idea of a main narrative within game design. Further to this, *Morrowind*'s implementation of the journal system as containing the character's reflections on events, rather than a direct copy of the dialogue involved creates another layer of narrative complexity and plurality within the creation of narrative, allowing the character's inner perspectives to be examined as well as their external actions. As Lewter, Ontanon, and Zhu

(2011) have noted this is a rare occurrence within role playing games where the focus tends to remain solely on the physical actions of the player, rather than their internal reflections. *Morrowind* goes some way towards including this internal narrative, although it remains somewhat more rudimentary and pre-determined than other aspects of the games narrativisation.

This ability to choose whether to engage in the main quest does not hamper the ability for the game to provide a satisfying and lengthy experience and can promote the inclusion of ethical and moral deliberations within the player's performance of their character (Simkins 2010). Indeed, looking at the individual subsidiary quests required for completion, the main quest only requires nineteen steps, in comparison to over thirty for most of the faction quest lines. While in places, the steps required in the main quest are longer or harder, each of the main faction quest lines is just as involved and complex, with often significant changes on the social, cultural, and geographic dimensions of the game world. De-centring the main narrative in this way pluralises the possible narratives that the player can create in their playthroughs, through engagement or non-engagement with the main quest, and through engagement or non-engagement in the various faction quest lines. The sheer extent of the available quest lines within the framework of the game pluralises the concept of a singular narrative to the game in a way that is reminiscent of certain movements towards plural and fragmentary narratives in post-modern literature (Ryan 2001).

The main quest exists in '*Morrowind*' not to only allow for some players to perform their characters within its structure, but also to provide meaning to those quests that are not part of the main quest line as well. The opportunity of meaning that the main quest in its mechanics provides is in tandem with the meaning provided to the broader social and cultural relationships expressed within the game by the historical background within which the main quest exists. As Rolston (RPG Roundtable #3 Part 1, IGN.com, 20th November 2003) has noted:

> There are epic characters, stories and themes behind *Morrowind*'s main quest, but you can ignore them and still enjoy the main quest gameplay. Even if you don't explore the background of the main quest, however, that epic background gives the world dignity, and by association, gives your hero dignity for the part he plays in its affairs.

This dignity provides depth and meaning to the world, and to the players' actions within the world depicted without constraining them to act in a certain way. He goes on to note:

> In an open-ended, freeform CRPG [Computer Role Playing Game], the important narrative elements are setting, themes, characters and faction conflicts - NOT the central story. Linear stories are the enemy of good gameplay.

Before quoting Greg Costikyan's phrase:

> "Stories are linear. Games are not."

These quotations, from the game's lead designer, form the basis of what *Morrowind* was supposed to be on release. The placement of the main quest, its relation to the trope of prophecy, and the formation of the cultural and social matrix of society on Vvardenfell were not accidental. The game forms an outcome of the deliberate decision to try and marry the two points that have been identified as in tension above, a prophetic narrative and free-form gameplay.

Morrowind's approach to narrative is therefore somewhat unique within its genre. The position of narrative, at least the game designers' narrative, as not an end in itself, with the game perfectly able to be played without any kind of engagement with it, allows for the integration of player choice within the narrative structure of the game to an extent that is greater than normal. As Simpkins (2010) notes, freedom of this kind, along with social context for the players actions, logical consequential outcomes to those actions and a reflexivity on the part of the narrative to them, provides a path towards both narrative creation, and immersion in the game. The depth of narrative available, and the broad choice of narratives that are able to be created by the player within the game system, foreground narrative generally, though not any one particular narrative, in a way that is significantly different to Ryan's (2001) identification of narrative in games as solely a tool of immersion, that can be easily dispensed with once the player is hooked. A key aspect of this is the low key way in which the 'entrance' to the main quest is presented, with the player easily able to remain completely unaware that this 'is' the main quest line until quite far through completion. This unobtrusiveness is continued in interaction with non-player characters suggesting the player heads off and completes some of the faction quests before returning, and in the complete lack of intrusion by the main quest should the player simply ignore the original prompt. This allows the engagement with the main quest, or any factional quest lines, to be part of the role playing of the player, expressing their particular character through their reaction to subtle external stimulus rather than forcing their involvement in a quest line which may have no interest to their created character.

This aspect of choice as key to the placement of the main quest in *Morrowind* represents a key attraction of the role-playing aspect of the game as it provides a greater sense of meaning of the actions chosen by the player character within the game world by making them a true, rather than false or forced, choice. The player is free to create their own narrative within a much larger set of possible designed narrative options, or, given the geographic and dialogical openness of *Morrowind*, to refuse the creation of any narrative but their own and wander aimlessly through the game. The point of tension previously identified between the developers' created text of the game, and the player's own process of text creation in their playthroughs is resolved by having the

developer texts function solely as a prop for the performance of the player's narrative. By this, I mean that even the main quest relies on the action of player choice in order to bring it into the foreground of the game narrative, de-constructing the notion of a necessary or even 'main' narrative to the game at all. In this *Morrowind* prefigures a type of narrative that is open and user-created, mirroring certain hypertext efforts in a way in which more accurately reflects the ideal than more traditional mediums that have been adapted for the purpose. While, as Turner (2005) notes, this type of narrative may remain niche, the increasing technological proficiency of game design and the increasing popularity of free-form gameplay mean that alternative user-created narrative are becoming more mainstream in the context of computer games than they ever have been in literature or art.

6 *Morrowind's* approach to prophecy

This unique approach to the formation of narrative in *Morrowind* is mirrored in its utilisation of the theological concept of prophecy in a particular way in the content of the main quest. As we saw earlier, the role that the notion of prophecy plays in the construction of the main quest narrative is significant in *Morrowind*, with it forming the structure of the main quest as a whole. We have also seen that this creates tension between the type of gameplay desired by the developers of *Morrowind*, open to player choice and expression, and the type of narrative that the concept of prophecy seems to require, linear and structured. Overcoming this tension requires a change in the theological conception of what prophecy is, as well as a change in the way in which prophetic tropes are implemented and introduced into game design. By doing so the tension present can be fruitfully resolved or balanced, while the two aspects remain central pieces of the overall game design. This synthesis of free-form gameplay and a prophetic narrative structure represents a significant step towards a new form of game design, a new understanding of the nature of prophecy, and a change in the formation of narratives within the context of role-play games.

Prophecy as it appears within the main quest of *Morrowind* is something that engagement with is fundamentally voluntary. While, as we saw in the earlier discussion of the particular characteristics of *Morrowind*'s gameplay, the individual performance by the gamer of their character's actions allow for the creation of both narrative in the wider sense, and meaning for their particular actions, the relationship of the player to the Nerevarine prophecy is one that is still a function of player choice. The prophecy requires, for its existence both within the game and in any particular play through, an active choice by the player – without this choice the prophecy never comes to light within the narrative of the game, and never has an impact on the world within which

it is set. This is important to the way in which the rather fixed narrative of prophecy is integrated within the broader world of *Morrowind*, takings its place as one among many possibly created narratives for each play through. Given this, perhaps it is better to talk of the Nerevarine prophecy not as the 'main' quest, but rather as the meta- or world quest, as while it has a far greater impact on the wider game world than the other quest lines on completion, it does not represent a necessary quest line for any character, and nor is it significantly longer or more involved than other comparable faction quest lines.

This approach to prophecy represents a significant shift in the way in which role playing computer games have commonly integrated prophetic narrative into their gameplay. While more recent *Elder Scrolls* games, such as '*Oblivion*' and '*Skyrim*', have foregrounded the 'main' quest line to a greater extent, either through the use of map icons, intrusive changes to the game environment, or forcing completion of certain aspects of it, *Morrowind* takes a very particular approach to it. The central storyline requires not only player involvement to start the narrative, but also continuous player involvement to continue it throughout the play through, something significantly different to popular conceptions of prophecy as pre-destinarian.

Further to this, *Morrowind*'s approach to prophecy contains within it a form of mutability, both in the meaning of the prophecy and the relationship of the player character to the prophecy. Critical to this mutability is the plurality of texts within the prophecy, its application to the individual player created character in the context of features of that character, and the narrative unfolding of the relationship between the character and the prophecy itself. While the main quest in *Morrowind* revolves around the Nerevarine prophecy, as we saw before this prophecy is made up of three individual prophecies that work together to outline the characteristics of the reincarnated Lord Nerevar, the actions required for the defeat of Dagoth Ur, and the various pieces of equipment required in order to do so. The three prophecies, '*The Stranger*', '*The Seven Visions*', and '*The Lost Prophecy*'[7] leave room for changeable aspects of the player's character, with specific characteristics being broad enough to fit any combination of race, gender, star sign etc. These specific characteristics required of the reincarnated Nerevar include being born under a particular star sign and being a foreigner to the island of Vvardenfell. As '*The Lost Prophecy*' narrates:

> From seventh sign of eleventh generation,
> Neither Hound nor Guar, nor Seed nor Harrow,
> But Dragon-born and far-star-marked,
> Outlander Incarnate beneath Red Mountain…

7 The full text of all of these prophecies can, again, be found either within the game itself, within the construction set offered, or transcribed on the UESP.net wiki.

The vague allusions to the foreign background of the reincarnated Nerevarine – "Neither Hound nor Guar, nor Seed nor Harrow" referring to the four native Ashlander clans, "Dragon-born" referring to the Imperial sign associated with the mainland, "Outlander" which is used a common term of reference for those not originally from the island of Vvardenfell - ties in well with the original character creation process which requires the choice by the player of both a race and a particular star sign, but which limits the player to outlander characters. While at the time this is presented purely in terms of role-play and game mechanics, the process also ties into the prophetic narrative presented within the game. However the prophecy presented above contains within it a certain amount of flexibility with regards to its particulars. This is perhaps more clearly seen in the following passage from The Stranger:

> To the hearth there comes a stranger,
> Journeyed far 'neath moon and star.
> Though stark-born to sire uncertain,
> His aspect marks his certain fate.

Both prophecies, while being specific about certain details, for example the Nerevarine's foreign birth, are generic enough about other details for the players role-playing and character customisation to fit within the prophetic narrative. This is clearly seen in the reference to "his aspect" rather than a particular star sign. This creates a form of mutability within the prophecy, allowing for differing aspects of player performance and identity to work within a broader prophetic narrative structure which uses the uncertainty represented by player choice in the character creation process in order to build a series of prophecies that are both immersive, in that they rely on specific details of the games background and canon, while also being amenable to the functionality of *Morrowind*'s player choice driven game design.

This balancing of the tension exposed earlier between the free-form gameplay of *Morrowind* and its prophetic main story exposes the third way in which its use of the theological concept of prophecy bears the closest examination. While the voluntary and mutable aspects of the particular prophecies examined above relate to the implementation and creation of the particular subsidiary prophecies, the integration of the Nerevarine prophecy as a whole within the game represents a new way for approaching the issue of prophecy in contemporary game narratives and design, while also representing a new direction in conceiving of the role and mechanics of prophecy itself.

On progressing through the course of the main quest and uncovering the various prophecies that make up the Nerevarine prophecy, the player character comes into contact with a wise-woman of the indigenous tribes of Vvardenfell, Nibani Maesa of the Urshilaku Ashlander tribe[8]. She plays

8 The Ashlanders are the native inhabitants of Vvardenfell who rejected the elevation of the Tribunal to divinity by

the role of guide to the player character, helping to uncover and decipher the prophecies, but also provides her own interpretations of the relationship of the player character to the Nerevarine prophecies. Throughout this role she maintains that the Nerevarine prophecy is not a fated role, which requires a predestinarian approach to the future, but is rather a calling or description of possible virtues to be perfected in anyone seeking to become the Nerevarine. On asking her if the player character meets the description of the Nerevarine, her reply proves illuminating as to this aspect of the concept of prophecy presented in the main quest of *Morrowind*:

> Nibani Maesa says I am not the Nerevarine, but I may become the Nerevarine[9].

This reply fits with the process through which the player character must go in order to be recognised as the true Nerevarine, a process of seven trials or tests, without which his / her[10] claim to be the fulfilment of the prophecy remains unproven, and critically, unrecognised.

Although able to be read as a specific prophecy dealing with a particular person and their definite actions, the Nerevarine prophecy is instead implemented as a prophecy regarding the virtues of the person that will complete the trials described. This moves the implementation of the prophecy from one that definitively predicts the future, to one that describes what may become, if and when someone with the required virtues arrives and chooses to engage and act out the prophecy. This move is not unique to *Morrowind*, but it does represent a significantly new way of approaching prophecy in an age where set or fixed narratives are viewed with suspicion and distrust. This is furthered by the later discovery by the player that he / she is not the first possible Nerevarine, and that they have been preceded by other virtuous heroes that fell along the quest.

The Nerevarine prophecy therefore acts not as a descriptive laying out of events, but as a guide to the characters possible actions – it is not determinative, but suggestive in nature. By building on the role-playing and performance aspects of the player character with regards to virtues such as heroism, care for others, a sense of responsibility for society, the prophecy encourages the player to complete certain actions which align with the type of things that a person of that particular character would probably do anyway. This reduces the obtrusive requirement of prophecy on the players' action by moulding the prophecy into the broader performance of the players' character through their in-game avatar.

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the Temple and have been forced out into the Ashlands as a consequence. They remain a warrior society organised into four clans: Urshilaku, Erebenisum, Ahemmusa, and Zainab.

9 This dialogue can be found either within the game during the 'Meet Sul-Matuul' quest line, or can be found in her dialogue options in the Elder Scrolls Construction Set packaged with the game.

10 Although in Morrowind players of either gender are equally able to be the Nerevarine and complete the main quest, later dialogue options in the '*Dragonborn*' (Bethesda 2013) expansion to '*Skyrim*' suggest that in-universe the Nerevarine was male, although this is only reported by a single character.

Prophecy becomes a suggestion, rather than an order, relying on and requiring active participation and 'playing-along' by the player in order to drive its unfolding. The player does not have to be Nerevar reborn if they do not wish to be, and does not have to do any of the actions that would be expected of them were they to be the Nerevarine. Rather the player chooses to be, and become, the Nerevarine through performing the actions expected of someone of the character or virtues of the Nerevarine, steadily perfecting the alignment between the player character and the Nerevarine character through the completion of the various trials and tribulations expressed in the content of the three prophecies which make up the Nerevarine prophecy. While the specifics of who the Nerevarine will be may be vague within the text of the prophecies, the expected actions and characteristics of the Nerevarine are much clearer.

This clarity with regards to the expected character of the Nerevarine, in contrast to the obscure references to particular features of their birth, race, or star sign, is most clearly seen in '*The Seven Visions*' prophecy which narrates the seven trials that the person who is the Nerevarine will overcome. It is written:

> Sixth trial
> He honors blood of the tribe unmourned.He eats their sin, and is reborn.
> Seventh trial
>
> His mercy frees the cursed false gods,
> Binds the broken, redeems the mad.
> One destiny
>
> He speaks the law for Veloth's people.
> He speaks for their land, and names them great.

Each of the first two stanzas of the prophecy quoted here relate not to specific actions as destined to come about, but present the actions that the Nerevarine is expected to perform as logical outcomes of the character of the reincarnated Nerevar. His honourable and merciful character are detailed more specifically than the consequences of these characteristics – his honourable and merciful character are mentioned first, and lead to the outcomes given, without the specific way in which this will be accomplished being revealed.

This change of focus from specific prophecy to a more general virtue prophecy represents a significant shift in the common appearance of prophecy in role playing games, and shift in the implementation of the theological concept of prophecy into game design. By freeing the prophetic narrative from specific actions and acts, the pre-destinarian aspect of the prophecy is reduced in the move from seeing the prophecy as fate, towards seeing it as representing a calling for the player

character. This refuses the reduction of player choice in more strongly prophetic narratives, while still using the trope of prophecy as a central part of the narrativisation of the game. In this, *Morrowind* prefigures contemporary, post-modern, moves in the utilisation of prophecy within narratives. This change in use and concept can be seen in popular works of fantasy fiction such as the Harry Potter series (JKA Smith 2005)[11] which, although sticking to a singular structural narrative, present the concept of prophecy as having aspects of mutability, change, and a closer relation to calling than fate.

Morrowind's use and presentation of prophecy in this way changes the way in which prophecy is commonly presented, as well as representing a successful synthesis of the contra-indicatory principles of a strong narrative and radically free player action, by placing the prophecy as an initial and continual part of the players' choices. In doing so, the prophecy serves to both create, and allow for, increased player choice through engagement or non-engagement, while also allowing those choices to have an impact on the wider game world. This choice, and the role playing it allows for, expands the development of meaning with regards to the relationship between the player and the broad narratives within the game, in turn creating a deeper involvement by the player in creating and performing their own narrative within the designed structure of the game.

7 Conclusion

I aim to have demonstrated that while the combination of a prophecy centred narrative and a commitment to free-form gameplay produces a serious tension in the production of a narrative and immersive game, *Morrowind* creates an effective synthesis between the two by reimagining both concepts. This re-imagining involves a change in the common positioning of prophecy in role playing games, from a central and necessary part of the game to one that requires player action to activate and continue through the game experience. As part of this, the relative unimportance of the prophecy based narrative in the game of *Morrowind* allows for significant exploration and enjoyment of the game without requiring the player character come into contact with the main quest at all – rather by increasing the effort put into factions quests, local culture and politics, as well as unconnected dungeon crawling, the need for a strong central, and ultimately obtrusive, narrative is reduced.

Further to this, *Morrowind*'s implementation of the concept of prophecy itself is significantly different to that commonly seen in alternative forms of popular culture and society (Shuck & Stroup

11 Reprinted in his book '*The Devil reads Derrida'*, the article '*Harry Potter and the Prophet of Doom*' originally appeared on Beliefnet.com, on July 15th 2005.

2007). While prophecy is normally associated with the pre-destination of events, *Morrowind*'s utilisation of multiple prophecies and 'virtue' rather than 'specific' prophecies creates more scope within the prophetic narrative for player choice and action. *Morrowind*'s understanding of prophecy as predicting the actions undertaken in a particular situation by someone of the prophesied character shifts the burden of narrative back on the player, allowing them to perform their actions either in accordance with the expected actions or not, as their own particular roleplaying narrative demands. The prophetic narrative is therefore mutable in its specificities, such as race or star sign, while also remaining open to the vagaries of player choice in a broader sense.

Morrowind represents an interesting intersection of a theological concept with popular culture that has an impact on the conceptualisation of both. The step made towards a focus in gaming on user-created "texts" of the game (Turner 2005), creates a change in the way in which the theological concept of prophecy is conceived and utilised within the game, leading to a pluralisation of the ways in which the prophetic narrative can be incorporated within the players own performed role playing narrative. In addition to this, *Morrowind*'s use of free-form gameplay opens a greater possibility for moral engagement (Svelch 2010) and agency (Mallon 2007) within the storyline, the incorporation of ethical meaning to the actions of the player character (Simkins 2010), and the representation of the inner reflection that drives those actions (Lewter, Ontanon & Zhu 2011). This aspect of *Morrowind*'s synthesis – a prophetic narrative encouraging and allowing for malleability with regards to user-created narratives – represents a significant shift in the conception of narrative in game design, as well as a step toward a problematisation of the relationship seen between prophecy and pre-destination.

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