

SKYRIM AS A REPRESENTATION OF THE AMERICAN DOMINANT CULTURE

Hartanto, R.¹ and Basuki, R.²

^{1,2}English Department, Faculty of Letters, Petra Christian University, Siwalankerto 121-131, Surabaya, 60236, East Java, INDONESIA

E-mails: m11411044@john.petra.ac.id; r.basuki@peter.petra.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This thesis aims to give pictures of the American values in an American cultural product, Bethesda's *Elder Scroll V: Skyrim*. I will use ideology as the concept to show that cultural products contain ideologies or values of the dominant group. The study shows that in the games, traditional American values serve as the standard values of the American dominant group. Furthermore, I show that American values in the video game are the same, although some values are shifting. In conclusion, I find out that *Elder Scroll V: Skyrim* has all of the American traditional values. The medieval setting of the game somehow shifts some values like material wealth since bloodline status is appreciated. Thus, *Elder Scroll V: Skyrim* does represent the American society and how it should be.

Key words: Traditional American values, video game, fantasy

INTRODUCTION

Bethesda Game Studios is in-house development team from United States which was founded in 2001 and is the child publisher of Bethesda Softworks. One of its well-known video game is *The Elder Scroll V: Skyrim*. *The Elder Scroll V: Skyrim* is one of the most popular action and sandbox RPG games in the world. *The Elder Scroll V: Skyrim* received awards from various gaming sites and publications. IGN and GameSpot named *Skyrim* "PC Game of the Year" in 2011. It also received GameSpot's "Readers' Choice" award. The game received the "RPG of the Year" award in 2011 from Spike TV, IGN, X-Play, GameSpot and GameSpy. It received "Overall Game of the Year" wins from Spike TV, X-Play, Machinima.com, GameSpot, 1UP.com, Game Revolution, and GameSpy in 2011 and Joystiq and the Interactive Achievement Awards in 2012.

The story of *the Elder Scroll V: Skyrim* begins in a caravan in the way to Helgen (a small town in *Skyrim*—a province of Tamriel). The main character is a prisoner. Along with other prisoners (mostly are the rebels of the *Skyrim*), the main character is going to be executed. While the character is about to be executed, a dragon comes and attacks all people in the town, but the dragon's attack accidentally helps the main character to escape the death sentence. The main character's first mission is escaping Helgen. The character needs to choose to escape with one of the rebels or one of the government's soldiers. After escaping Helgen, the main character is led by the rebel/government's soldier to a nearby village. From the village the rebel/soldier's family asks the character to ask for the help of a nearby Jarl (a title given to a ruler in a town, like a mayor). Later, the Jarl asks for help to slain a dragon that wanders around the city. After the main character slains the dragon, it is shown that actually he/she is a Dragonborn, the only person who can slay a dragon completely. His/her missions is to know what Dragonborn is and after knowing what it is to be a Dragonborn, he/she will be given a task to learn how to slain the leader of all dragons named Alduin. This game has the ending when the player finish the main quest to slain Alduin. However, even when the game is finished, the player still can continue the game to wander off or finishing side quests.

In this analysis, I want to discuss the basic American values in the video game. Whether or not the video games depicts all of the basic American values. Therefore, I use the traditional American values as guidelines of the values inside the video game. I will also compare these values to the values inside the video game. I also use Storey's third definition of ideology to think and see that this video game should represent how a specific part of the world is or should be, in this case the United States of America.

SKYRIM AS A REPRESENTATION OF THE AMERICAN DOMINANT CULTURE

The Elder Scroll V: Skyrim is an American video game played on personal computer (PC). The video game itself tells the story of nobody who will become a hero to save the world from dragons' revival. This video game as a product of culture must contain a lot of ideologies and values. As an American cultural product, this video game is supposed to have a lot of American values. In this chapter, by analyzing the values inside *Skyrim*, I would like to find out what values *Skyrim* has inside and how they represent the American dominant group.

Based on what Storey (2001) says that "... texts (television fiction, pop songs, novels, feature films, etc.) always presents a particular image of the world" (p. 4), a video game, as a product of culture, must contain values in it. From the story and gameplay, the values will be analyzed and then they will be discussed how they represent American values.

Individual Freedom and Self-Reliance

In this sub-chapter, I will analyze one of the traditional American values: individual freedom. Self-reliance will be there as the consequences of the individual freedom. I will divide this sub-chapter into two: individual freedom and self-reliance.

Individual Freedom

The United States of America is well known for its liberty. Like what Dantesman et al, (1997) previously said, individual freedom, as one of the traditional American values, is the capability of someone to control his/her life without others to interfere. (p. 23) In other words, nobody is able to limit an individual's fate. Americans are capable of speaking out their opinion towards everything. No one has the right to limit a person's opinion. It somehow says that there is no limitation in choices at all. Logically speaking, there is always a limitation in freedom. If one is really capable of doing anything s/he wants, one can destroy other's freedom. If one can freely destroy other's freedom, the nation will not be a nation of freedom. The fact that America values freedom means that there is a limitation in a person's freedom. One can act like whatever s/he wants as long as s/he does not interfere other's freedom. Killing others for example, means that one completely demolish the person's freedom to live.

Freedom of Expressing Self-Identity and Thought

To begin with, *Skyrim* lets the player decide the appearance of the main character. This somehow tells that the player is capable of being what they want. The video game has quite big range of races that can be chosen. Furthermore, the video game enables character modification. A player is capable of modifying the race s/he selected in the beginning and in middle of the game. This feature shows that one person can have the freedom to choose his/her appearance. Secondly, the players can deliver their opinion inside the game. The player has the capability to give opinion simply by having options inside the video game. Each options in the video game leads to different response and storyline. For example, some of the NPCs (Non-Playable Characters) will experience the changes. Some NPCs will disappear and some will change the appearance or status (in game status such as nobles or common rabbles). The freedom of expression, in this case: giving opinion, in *Skyrim* is a little bit different. It is somehow more than it is supposed to be. The actions and choices never determine the character's annihilation but they always determine other's fate. Lastly, the video game lets the player decide how the gameplay is. The video game gives the player freedom to build his/her own strategy. The player can also choose which way is the best for him/her. *The Elder Scroll V: Skyrim* lets the player determine his/her enemies. The main character can directly fight hard enemies such as mammoth, giants and dragons at early level. Winning a fight in *Skyrim* is more to how the player controls the movement of the main character because the player controls the main character directly. The movement of the main character—dodging, attacking and blocking—are fully controlled by the player. However, higher levels still give more chances to win in battles because it unlocks more skill trees and gives additional health, stamina and *mana* (points used to cast some magic skills). Moreover, the armors and weapons in this video games does not have any requirements. The main character can use any kind of weapon even from the beginning.

Freedom, in the American values, is applied in *the Elder Scroll V: Skyrim*. The player has the freedom to choose his/her appearance, freedom to give opinion and the way s/he experiences the

game. It means the game let the player choose the fate. However, there are certain points of freedom that are not at the same page. As we know, freedom is the power of one to control his/her fate, but *Skyrim* offers more than that. First of all the main character is somehow the one who controls people's fate. The main character has the option and power to kill certain people while s/he is also capable of granting other's wish. Some of these actions does not have consequences, especially if it is a quest. Other than controls other's fate, the slight difference is the main character's fate. There are a lot of ways to finish the main quest, but the end is the same. The main character needs to slain the main opponent. This shows that the fate of the main character is determined.

Freedom of Believing in Any God

According to Martin, S. F. "The first permanent English colony was founded in Virginia in 1607 by a trading company that was primarily interested in profits" (p. 3). After that, the colony grew larger and there are more permanent colony in certain areas. "Massachusetts was also settled by a trading company, but its goals were loftier – to establish a colony for coreligionists who shared Puritan theology and values" (p. 3). From what should be a trading company, the settlement changed into religious matter. "...the colony's immigration model was to welcome the true believer but to exclude and, in certain cases, to expel or even kill those whose views challenged the conventional wisdom" (p. 3). The England colony that came to America accepted immigrants, especially those who have the same believe: the Puritans. In her book, she also quoted Fuchs that this Massachusetts model "became influential in the development of a national ideology of Americanism, but it was too restrictive to form a dominant immigration and naturalization policy" (p. 3). From the quotation above, it is shown that the basic values of religion in America is actually the Protestants values. Of course, later Americans were more tolerant to diversity, yet Christianity was still the main belief of the country. This example can be seen also in the later American texts. Basuki explained "The heroes in American melodrama are usually successful WASP (white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant)" (2003). Because of the heroes are successful WASP, it can also be said that the main character depicts protestant values. Therefore, it can be said that the values are mostly protestant values. It means that whatever the belief: Islam, Jews, etc., the morals are based on Protestantism.

In the video game, people are free to choose whatever belief they want, but there are dominant values. There is a dominant group called the Nordics who believe in Talos. Other than Talos, there are 8 other divines who are worshipped as gods in land of *Skyrim*. However, the 9th god, *Talos* was banned because the government signs a peace treaty that bans the worship of *Talos*. Nonetheless, the actions of worshipping *Talos* is still there, even within the nobles. People, especially the nobles, who worship *Talos*, are doing it silently. There is a quest comes from Elisif, the High Queen of *Skyrim*, that asks the *Dragonborn* to help her to give offerings to *Talos*.

Elisif : When we buried my husband I made offerings to all the gods... except Talos.

Even when the Imperial outlaw the worship of *Talos*, somehow the High Queen herself still wants to keep the worship of this god. This proof shows that the value of freedom of religion is free. Like explained, American accepts all religions, but the main value itself is Protestantism. *Skyrim*, somehow, values all the gods, but the *nords* always values *Talos* more. The example gives proof that even a High Queen risked herself by trying to give offering tributes to the god banned by the Imperial because she is also a *nord*.

Freedom of Choosing Partner

Another value of freedom that is in trend in United States of America is the gay marriage or homosexuality. Another statistic from statista.com says that the percentage of Americans saying gay/lesbian relations are morally acceptable is 63%.

Elder Scroll V: Skyrim also sees these interracial marriage and homosexuality as the right of everyone. The game features marriage. Marriage in this video game is so free. There are no gender and race limitation in the video game. Anyone can marry anybody from the same or different race and gender except the married ones and children. Marriage in *Skyrim* gives benefits to the main character. The spouse will be some kind of merchant after marriage. The main character can ask for profit money that the spouse gets every day and the spouse will gladly give it. This shows somehow the video game encourages marriage and the marriage somehow is not limited by race and sex, as

long as the spouse is willing to get married. The player cannot pick anyone as a spouse. A character is willing to be married if the main character does a great deed towards the spouse-to-be.

Self-reliance of Completing the Game

Freedom has a “side effect.” Datesman et al. (1997) explained that “Individuals must learn to rely on themselves or risk losing their freedom” (p. 24). One is not free as long as s/he depends on other individuals. Not depending on any other individual means that if a person do all the work, s/he receives all the credits including the consequences. In America, people see a self-reliance as a social status too. Datesman et al. (1997) also stated that “If people are dependent, they risk losing freedom as well as the respect of their peers. Even if they are not truly self-reliant, most American believe they must at least appear to be so.” (p. 24). This statement clarifies that the Americans highly value self-reliance. The American thinks that being independent is a mandatory thing. This value also appears in *Skyrim*. To start with, the freedom of gameplay makes the winning chance depend only to the player. The player gets the freedom to choose how s/he will play the game or fight in battles. The player’s skill of playing will determine the victory over a battle. Usually in certain games, because lack of control, the victory is decided by how powerful the equipment not by how skillful a player is. As a cost, the player does not have the option to leave the battle to AI (Artificial Intelligence). The player’s presence is needed all the time in battles. Furthermore, the video game gives the freedom to have a companion or someone to help along the way. However, this option will burden the main character. The main character will not be able to execute certain skills such as stealth kill because the companion might not have such a skill. Likewise, the companion can even be a hindrance in a battle. The main character might not have a clear shot (if using bow) and cannot execute certain magic because the companion is in the way. This trait somehow suggests the player do the journey throughout land of *Skyrim* alone without any companions because the companion can be a hindrance.

Equality of Opportunity and Competition

In this sub-chapter, the values: equality of opportunity and competition will be analyzed further. The sub-chapter will be divided into two. The first one is equality of opportunity and the second one is Competition.

Equality of Opportunity

The sub-chapter of equality of opportunity will be divided into another two sub-chapters. The first one is equality in race and the second one is equality in social status.

Another traditional value of the Americans is the equality of opportunity. Like what Datesman et al. (1997) wrote “everyone has a chance to succeed here.... They felt that because individuals are free from excessive political, religious, and social controls, they have a better chance for personal success. Of particular importance is the lack of hereditary aristocracy” (p. 25).

Equality in Race

Everyone in the video game has equal start. Race and sex do not interfere with what someone is doing. It can be seen by looking at the main story, the communities and the skill trees. Firstly, the equality of chance for everyone to have a chance to be successful. In the beginning the player will choose the characteristic of the main character including race and skin color. The 10 playable races in this video game have different social status. Some are more dominant and some are less. The main character, regardless his/her race, will be the *Dragonborn*, an old legend of *Skyrim* in which the person has the dragon blood and the only one who can completely slain the dragon. Likewise, the video game shows that any race can join any fractions or groups all around *Skyrim*. The main character, regardless his/her race has the equality to join any race available. Furthermore, every race has the equality to have or master any skills and perks available. There are 18 different skills in this video game. Every race has different levels of each skill, but every skills is not exclusive to any race. Every race and sex is capable of choosing and strengthen any skill available and even combine any skills available.

The equality of race is in one way or another applied and appreciated in this video games. From the main story itself, the *Dragonborn*, the savior of the world, can be from any race. The

representation of the main character that can be from any race also suggests that everyone can join any group or factions as long as s/he qualified. This can be proven through the first characterization. The main character can be any race available and will become *Dragonborn*. However, there are certain people that have different start in the way of gaining success. Because ruling system is monarchy, there are titles that are given to certain people from the bloodline. This fact is in contrast to what America think about equality of opportunity. In his book, Dantesman et al. (1997) says "... their place in life was determined largely by the social class into which they were born. They knew that in America they would not have to live among noble families who possess great power and wealth inherited and accumulated over hundreds of years" (p. 35). This statement shows that those who came to America seek no classes and nobility titles and it became the fundamental value in America. *Skyrim* has people (NPCs) who are born with title, yet titles are just to be respected. There is not much of oppression from the rich to the poor. Also, titles and nobilities can be gained through hard work.

Equality in Social Status

The equality in social status means that everyone regardless his/her status will have the chance to gain equality. Most of the time, those who live as orphans will get an unfair in starting the road to success. However, accepting the adoption over birth means that even the orphans will be able to start the road too. *Skyrim* supports this action inside the game. The player is able to have a child, but it is done only through adoption. Even other straight married couple in *Skyrim* does not have an option to have a child of their own. This reflects the point that there are a lot of adoptions going on in America despite the fact that some people still believe wrongly about adoption—behavioral issues or love issues, for example. Some different-sex married people opt for adoption because "they see adoption as a universal remedy for a host of problems from overpopulation to infertility" (Newman, 2008). As for the same-sex married people, adoption is just one of many ways to get a child. It is estimated that approximately 65,500 adopted children are being raised by lesbian or gay parents (Gates et al., 2007).

Having a child in *Skyrim* is not just a feature. The children may give advantages to the main character. The children will present certain items to the main character. The items are: clothing, alchemy ingredients, jewelry, daggers, ores, or soul gems. This option shows that there is a chance for the orphans to be successful. However, does not mean that every child should be successful because there is a competition in the race of success.

Competition of being Successful and Well-Known

However, not everyone will be able to complete the race to be successful. Dantesman (1997) advised, it does not mean that everyone should have an equal chance to gain success. The life in United States is seen more of 'a race for success.' Thus, it creates competitions one to another (p. 25-26). In *Skyrim*, everyone from any race is able to choose his/her way of success. Even a person from an inferior race is capable of being a Jarl's Housecarl (private guardian) which shows that everyone has the same start. Nonetheless, there are quite a lot people who lose the race and become jobless or do low paid jobs.

The pressure to compete causes Americans to be energetic, but it also places a constant emotional strain on them. When they retire ... They may feel useless and unwanted in a society that gives so much **prestige** to those who compete well. (p. 26)

Competition to those who cannot compete well gives a mental pressure. In a place where competition is high, a 'lost' person will fill like s/he does not belong anymore. In *Skyrim*, the competition can be said quite high because there are quite a lot of jobless people.

Material Wealth and Hard Work

Material wealth is one of American traditional values that attracts many immigrants to come to the United States. The video game also enables thievery as one method to be rich. Conversely, these actions have consequences. If the main character is caught stealing, pickpocketing or breaking into someone's house, the people and guards around will directly attack the main character. A similar action will happen if the main character kills a civilian. An assassin from the dark brotherhood will come and try to kill the main character. This kind of actions shows that there are still some Christian

values there: the act of stealing and killing are somehow forbidden. There are punishment of doing these acts. However, the main character is capable of defending him/herself because the mercenaries are trying to kill the main character. This act of defending shows that actually even though the values are there, they are a little bit shifted.

The material wealth, other than one of the reasons many immigrant came to America at the first place, is also something valued by most Americans.

Placing a high value on material possessions is called *materialism*, but this is a word that most American find offensive.... Nevertheless, acquiring and maintaining a large number of material possession is of great importance to most Americans. Why is this so?

Probably the main reason is that the material wealth has traditionally been a widely accepted measure of social status in the United States. Because the Americans rejected the European system of hereditary aristocracy and titles of nobility, they had to find a substitute for judging social status. (p. 27)

Somehow, gathering a lot of material wealth will lift up someone's social status. One will be seen as a respected person if s/he is wealthy. However, the material wealth is not just gaining wealth. To see that the first settlers came in order to escape the European system of hereditary aristocracy, the kind of wealth that is "accepted" by the society comes from the person's hard work, is not wealth that comes from other person or people's hard work. The video game somehow does not really value material wealth. Even if the main character is so rich in money and valuable goods, there will be no one giving any privileges or special treatment to the player. Still, there are some advantages that can be gained by being rich. The more wealthy the player, the easier the gameplay will be since the player will be able to buy goods and rare equipment, potions and spells. These items are very useful in combat. They maintain the survivability of the main character.

Hard work, in traditional American values, is the cost of material wealth. People are willing to do a lot of hardship in order to gain material wealth as it determines one's social status. In other words, the material wealth is gained by a person in order to show the hard works done by the person. Like explained, *Skyrim* values the hard work. Furthermore, the video game will also directly appreciate the achievements that the main character gets. Every guard will notice what the main character has done. When the player reaches certain level in skills for example. The guard will notice and give different dialogue than the usual. This even also occurs when the main character joins certain guilds or factions and after completing some quests like the main quest. This actions or experiences tell that the video game determine the social status directly from hard work. Thus, it can be assumed that material wealth is still valued but does not really determine one's social status. On the other hand, hard work will directly determines one's social value.

All of these hard works show the existence of courage. Courage is somehow included as part of material wealth and hard work. Wilson explained that "Anyone who crossed the Atlantic and braved the challenge of an unknown continent had to be optimistic. The cowards never started; the weak died on the way" (as cited in Basuki, 2003, p. 2). This statement explains that only the ones with enough courage are the ones who are strong enough to leave their homeland and go to America. Basuki also explains that Wilson implies the heroic characteristics lies in the journey. Thus, it indicates that people who have made their way to America are considered courageous and heroic. Courage is connected to the material wealth and hard work because courage triggers people who are seeking material wealth and to come and only those who have courage are willing enough to leave everything behind to face hard work in order to gain material wealth.

The Elder Scroll V: Skyrim's main character, Last *Dragonborn*, is also a heroic figure. It was said in *The Book of the Dragonborn* that the fate of the world is on his/her hand because of the Alduin's return. The main character will be struggling in learning to control his/her power in order to fight the world eater (Alduin). Alduin is a Nordic god of destruction who was mistakenly considered as one of the eight Divines.

Initially, the main character, the *Dragonborn*, needs to survive in the worst event possible. To begin with, s/he must face the fact that s/he is brought to a town called Helgen to be executed as a consequence of passing a border. Later, when s/he is about to be beheaded, a dragon attacks and s/he needs to avoid the rubbles and the dragon's attack with both hands tied. Then, s/he has to pass through caves filled with creatures and people who wants to attack the main character. The courage

is shown through how the main character must face the things mentioned with whatever weapons or armors s/he can find.

Furthermore, the main character is made aware that s/he has a special gift of being a *Dragonborn* in the middle of the dragon crisis. This means that s/he is the only one who can save the fate of the world from the terror of Alduin, although s/he does not have any knowledge or clue about his/her gift. Moreover, the main character is required to go to certain dungeons which s/he does not know what may be waiting in order to retrieve certain items, to kill certain creatures, or to find certain people. Those requirements are needed for the main character to acknowledge some information about the history of the dragons and the *Dragonborn* because s/he has to master those information so that s/he can slay Alduin. This shows that the main character is a heroic figure because s/he has to endure those struggles and fights mostly alone.

These brave acts done by the main character include rewards. The main character gets not only the material wealth, but also fame (social status). Since material wealth is associated with social status, so gaining status here has the same value like material wealth. The main character does not expect all of the thing to happen because at the first place s/he does not even realize that s/he will be what so called *Dragonborn*. S/he just goes through the unknown and does all of the hardship s/he finds. This act shows courage and courage is rewarded by 'material wealth'.

Material wealth however as a status and a sign of hard work is somehow omitted in the video game. The video game does not represent material wealth as a sign of hard work, but directly pays hard with status. People of *Skyrim* can see the result of one's hard work by looking at one's title.

CONCLUSION

All of the analyzed values show that the video game still holds the traditional American values but in some ways shifts some of the values. The value of individual freedom is somehow more than it is supposed to be. One cannot take other's value, but *Skyrim* gives that freedom of killing some people. The fate of the main character is set. S/he will be the one who save the world since the power is a gift. The value of equality of opportunity is not really shifted. The video game lets everyone to join the road to success, but like what explained, not everyone gets to be successful. The value material wealth is still appreciated in the video game. It appears that the value of hard work to gain material wealth is transferred to hard work to gain titles. Titles are somehow more important compared to material wealth, but these titles does not contribute anything to winning the game. On the other hand, having much money contributes more than having titles. Storey (2001) explains that said "... all texts are ultimately political. That is, they offer competing ideological significations of the way the world is or should be" (p. 4). By using Storey's explanation, it can be assumed that the video game reflects how American society is or how it should be. Nevertheless, *Skyrim* took time in middle age era. The shifting values that are applied in the video game might be different from the value of what American society have in 2011. This can be the reason why some values like freedom and material wealth are a bit shifted. I also found that the values in *the Elder Scroll V: Skyrim* are mostly similar to the traditional American values with some shifting or new values. The aspect of WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) in the video game is somehow modified. The main heroic figure is not white anymore, it is changed into human/human-like races. The Protestant aspects are still there, but not directly presented like in American melodrama. Hence, I conclude that *the Elder Scroll V: Skyrim* does have the same values of the traditional American values with some values are modified, which means that the video game represents the American society, in this case the values of the dominant group.

REFERENCES

- A history of video game consoles*. (n.d.). Retrieved from [http:// content.time.com/ time/ interactive/ 0,31813,2029221,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/interactive/0,31813,2029221,00.html)
- Baker, C. (2002). *Making sense of cultural studies: Central problems and critical debates*. Trowbridge, Wiltshire: SAGE Publications.
- Basuki, R. (2003). *A Journey Across the Atlantic: the History of Melodrama in Western Landscape*. K@ta: a biannual publication of the study of language and literature. Vol. 5, No.1, pp. 1 – 11.

- Datesman, M. K., Crandall, J., & Kearny, E. N. (1997). *The american ways: An introduction to american culture*. White Plains NY: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Eldridge, J. (2012). Video game genres, a list and the definition. Retrieved from <http://www.examiner.com/article/video-game-genres-a-list-and-the-definition>
- Eldridge, J. (2012). Best sandbox role playing games, definition and meaning. Retrieved from <http://www.examiner.com/article/the-definition-and-meaning-of-sandbox-role-playing-games>
- Laird, J. E. (2005, July). History of computer games. Retrieved from <http://www.emunix.emich.edu/~evett/GameProgramming/History.pdf>
- Martin, S. F. (2011). *A Nation of Immigrants*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Storey, J. (2001). *Cultural theory and popular culture*. London: Pearson/Prentice Hall.