

Linguistic Representations in Digital Narratives: Language Ideologies in Triple-A Video Games

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<p>Tämä tutkimus käsittelee kieli-ideologioita suosittujen valtavirtavideopelien (AAA-pelit) esittämissä digitaalisissa narratiiveissa. Tutkimuksen tavoitteena on selvittää, millä englannin kielen aksenteilla pelien hahmot puhuvat ja miten nämä aksentit ovat jakautuneet hahmojen edustamien narratiivien rakenteellisten funktioiden (arkkityyppien) kesken; premissinä on, että toistuvat valinnat heijastavat vallitsevia kieli-ideologioita. Vaikka pelien rooli mediatuotteiden kentällä on laajentunut huomattavasti 2000-luvulla, on sosiolingvistinen, pelien kieliasenteita ja -ideologioita tarkasteleva tutkimus saanut jalansijaa vasta viime vuosina. Tällaisen tutkimuksen tärkeys kasvaa jatkuvasti pelien saavuttaessa yhä enemmän uusia pelaajia: aiempi mediatutkimus on osoittanut, että median esittämät kielelliset representaatiot voivat vaikuttaa katsojien (tai pelaajien) kieliasenteisiin.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen aineisto koostuu kahdestakymmenestä viidestä AAA-videopelistä PlayStation 4 -konsolille. Pelit ovat vuosilta 2014-2018, viisi myydyintä peliä kultakin vuodelta. Erittelen jokaisen pelin päänarratiivista kymmenen keskeisintä hahmoa, jotka lajittelen kvantitatiivisesti arkkityyppiluokkiin käyttäen Vladimir Proppin arkkityyppien typologiaa. Tämän jälkeen pohdin pelien narratiivien realismin vaikutuksia aksenttien jakautumiseen arkkityyppiluokkien kesken. Tutkimuksen lopuksi tarkastelen lähemmin yhtä aksenttia, afroamerikkalaista englantia, sekä yhtä videopeliä, Assassin's Creed Unityä, jotka molemmat paljastavat esimerkinomaisesti eri puolia niin tutkimuksen kohteena olevista aksenteista kuin niiden esiintymiskonteksteista.</p> <p>Tulokset paljastavat standardin pohjoisamerikkalaisen englannin (sekä vähemmässä määrin standardin brittienglannin) hallitsevuuden: nämä aksentit dominoivat lähes kaikkia arkkityyppiluokkia ja muodostavat yleisimmin pelin ns. lingvistisen matriisin, jota vasten muut aksentit peilautuvat. Arkkityypeistä erityisesti sankareilla on omanlaisensa rooli, ja he puhuvat aina standardiaksentilla, ellei pelin narratiivin konteksti toisin edellytä. Muut, harvinaisemmat aksentit, esiintyvät useimmin vähäpätöisemmillä roolihahmoilla, kuten sankarin apulaisilla tai vastustajilla. Pelin narratiivin konteksti (tosimaailmaan perustuva vs. fiktiivinen) vaikuttaa siihen, mitä aksentteja pelin hahmoilla voi esiintyä, ja ei-standardit aksentit vaativat esiintyä useimmin tosimaailmaan perustuvan lingvistisen kontekstin. Tutkimus osoittaa pohjoisamerikkalaisen standardin kielen ideologian olevan vahvasti läsnä ja ohjaavan aksenttien jakautumista roolihahmojen kesken nykyaikaisissa AAA-videopeleissä.</p>			
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1. Introduction

Paris, 1789. The French Revolution. The streets are alive and bustling, the façade of the Notre-Dame cathedral arises in the background, as two men hove into view and engage in conversation – in English, with a Southern Standard British accent. Is something amiss or is this so natural that the viewer does not even notice? The aforementioned scene is from a video game, *Assassin's Creed Unity*, that is among the data of games featured in my study that focuses on the language use of characters within video game narratives. Why video games, then?

The role of the broadcast media as agents of socialization has grown steadily since the early 20th century (Lippi-Green 2012: 101), and the same could now be said of video games: while certainly not the only new medium of the new millennium, they are arguably *the* most prominent form of digital storytelling in the early 21st century. Indeed, video games have truly come a long way, both artistically and commercially, since their humble origins in the 1970's. The industry's annual revenue surpassed both Hollywood and the music industry over a decade ago¹ and today, video games are played by over two billion people of all ages the world over.

It is only fairly recently, however, that games have been viewed as a serious object of scientific inquiry – such research focusing on communication and discourse, in our case, started surfacing merely a decade ago (Ensslin 2012: 3). The objective of this study is to contribute to that body of research by examining the underpinnings and manifestations of language attitudes and ideologies in video games – a new and untapped area of inquiry. In video games' arguably closest relative medium, film and television, linguistic representations have been extensively studied in multiple contexts (e.g. Bleichenbacher 2008; Queen 2015; Heaton 2018). These audiovisual narratives, as we shall see, are comparable in many ways, sharing elements both in design and representational output.

Regardless of semiotic modalities, however, one factor remains constant across most of the Western entertainment media: that of the English language. This is true as well with the object of my study, *AAA (Triple-A) games*, which are the big-budget, mainstream titles of the video game industry. In these games, an early 20th century highwayman in the Wild West to a Norse demi-god, they all speak the English language. But not all characters speak alike.

The fundamental question I pose in this paper, then, is “how do video game characters speak?” Specifically, my interests lie in what accents are featured and, more importantly, on which types of

¹ <https://www.econotimes.com/The-Gaming-Industry-Is-Now-Bigger-Than-Hollywood-1558784>

characters and in which types of narrative contexts they appear. The relevant theoretical concepts are those of language attitudes and language ideology, which I relate to portrayals of language use in games. And indeed, understanding the nature of language beyond its formal qualities requires the study of its social functions and characteristics, including attitudes to usage and the phenomena relating to language standardization (Milroy & Milroy 2012: 7). The linguistic representations found in media products are always a choice of design, and these decisions can have effects on attitudes and ideologies in the real world, far beyond the realm of simple electronic entertainment media (Goorimoorthee et al. 2019).

If language attitudes, then, are reflected in media representations (games, in our case), we should be able to find correlations between affecting factors, such as between the prestige of an accent and the role of a character within the narrative. My primary tool for analyzing this relationship is Vladimir Propp's archetypology (1968), which I utilize to delineate differences between different narrative functions of the characters. I also draw the distinction between "real" and "fictional" narrative contexts: a rendition of modern-day Chicago, for example, might necessitate certain types of accents, but how do characters speak in imaginary fantasy worlds, and why? My main argument running along this paper is that there are a few key factors that either facilitate or constrain the connections between certain accents and certain archetypes, all set against the backdrop of a particular narrative context. I outline my hypotheses in detail at the end of my background chapter.

To the best of my knowledge, a comprehensive account of linguistic representations in video games does not yet exist. The first large-scale project with aims similar to mine finished recently and is awaiting publications ("Speech Accents in Games," Goorimoorthee et al. 2019). That study, however, aims to "link character accents to political and social roles and meanings" (ibid.: 274). While I certainly touch upon similar topics as well, my study is unique in that it is the first to combine archetypes and accents in this manner, therefore explicating the connection(s) between linguistic representations and the deeper, functional building blocks of the narrative.

The research questions to be addressed in my study are:

1. What kinds of dialects and accents can we find in AAA videogames?
2. How are these elements divided among the pertinent narrative roles within the game?
3. Does the game's narrative setting affect the answer to the aforementioned questions?
4. What kinds of ideological trappings do the resulting linguistic divisions reveal?

2. Background

In this chapter, I outline the theoretical background of my study. I start with discussing language attitudes and ideologies, followed by a look at video games and the language use within them. I then connect these concepts to the relationship between language attitudes and the media. Lastly, I introduce Propp's (1968) archetypology of characters' narrative functions and relate it to video game narratives.

2.1 Language Attitudes, Linguistic Prestige

Language always has many dimensions in addition to the purely linguistic. For our purposes, the social aspect is the most relevant, as with it comes attitudes, opinions, and value judgments about certain kinds of language (use). At the same time, language is inextricably connected to social identities, and different language varieties can have different levels of prestige associated with them by the society at large. In perceptions about language use, these social factors generally dominate over the linguistic; to a layperson, the prestige associated with a social identity is what matters most, or to put it simply: "language varieties acquire prestige when their *speakers* have prestige, because prestige is associated by human beings to particular social groups" (Milroy 2001: 532). Also, Gee (2018: 81) notes that "discourses are about enacting and recognizing socially significant identities [...] one way we enact identity is by using different varieties (styles) of language." These varieties of a language, then, carry perceived qualities and social meanings that can elicit diverse reactions as well as have real-life social consequences for the persons using it (Garrett 2010: 2). In the US, for example, SSBE (Southern Standard British English) speakers have traditionally been evaluated positively in competence and social status but negatively in terms of solidarity (Stewart et al. 1985). In other words, an accent or a dialect will "have qualities" associated with the social group itself. Hence, the perception of a language variety in use can lead to stereotypic assumptions about shared characteristics of those group members (Garrett 2010: 33).

Moreover, attitudes towards language use – and the concomitant value judgments – are often prescriptive in nature (Milroy & Milroy 2012: 10). As it stands, linguistic evidence has done little to change popular attitudes about the superiority/inferiority of certain accents and dialects, which speaks for the deep-seated psychological roots of said attitudes (Edwards 2009: 65). Value judgments about different languages are relatively rare, but among dialects they are far more common: indeed, the lexeme "dialect" itself has often been used to denote a "substandard

deviation” from a more prestigious standard form (ibid.). Language attitudes are therefore closely connected with evaluations of intra-language variation.

On that note, Milroy and Milroy (2012: 2) continue that, in our society, discrimination based on individual qualities such as race or gender is frowned upon, but discrimination on linguistic grounds can be perfectly acceptable. Indeed, “[o]rdinary people (i.e. non-linguists) [...] have been accustomed from time immemorial to make value judgments about language” (Milroy & Milroy 2012: 10). As Edwards (2009: 82) noted already a decade ago, increased diversity in the media and the “more reasonable workings of political correctness” might have had an effect on the public expressions of prejudice, language included, but strong opinions and bemoans of incorrect language use are among us even to this day (Peterson 2020).

However, these (prescriptive) attitudes towards language use are rarely about the language, per se. Edwards (2009: 63) highlights the symbolic function of language and that, moreover, most discourse about “the social life of language” is not really about language itself, but rather about identity. Indeed, “everyone is used to accent, dialect and language variations that reveal speakers’ memberships in particular speech communities, social classes, ethnic and national groups” (ibid.: 21). The perception of exactly who is speaking (and the pertinent social connotations) can even have an effect on the aesthetic evaluations of said variety as well (ibid.: 67).

Two important notions, then, about attitudes beget attention: Firstly, attitudes are *learned* (Garrett 2010: 22–23). Since attitudes are primarily shaped by our interactions with the social world, what matters is where, how, and to what kinds of attitudes and ideological content we are exposed to. Secondly, the *sources* of these attitudes lie in both our personal experiences and our social environment, including the media (ibid.). Today, younger people especially are actively engaging in social activities involving English through a variety of media, such as films, games and social media platforms (Peterson 2020: 4). It could well be argued that such content forms a large part of a Western youth’s engagement with media, especially in a non-native (L2) context, where a person’s English speech community is either non-existent or primarily situated in the online world. In Finland, for example, gaming is a popular pastime for many young people and a significant source of nonformal learning of English (Tanskanen 2019). The immanent language ideological positions in these often North American media can therefore be exposed to millions of people, alongside whatever knowledge or entertainment they provide. I discuss language attitudes and the media more in section 2.4.

2.2 (Standard) Language Ideology

On a general level, ideology can be conceptualized in relation to attitudes as a supraconcept, a “system of representations” that include “images, myths, ideas or concepts” (Kang 2018: 68). Among the first definitions of linguistic ideology was Silverstein’s (1979: 193), as “sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use.” As Woolard (1998: 3) puts it: “[r]epresentations, whether explicit or implicit, that construe the intersection of language and human beings in a social world are what we mean by ‘language ideology’.” Language ideologies, then, capture people’s “preconceived notions, beliefs and/or emotions [...] about certain social styles, varieties, or features of a language” (Peterson 2020: 7). These views can be explicit and articulated, and indeed, sometimes language attitudes can be most effectively assessed by direct methods (surveys, etc.) – but they need not be so.

Blommaert and Verschueren (1998) point out that language ideology manifests itself just as well in latent ways. This premise is based on the assumption that the “implicit frame of reference” (ibid.: 357) of a text’s linguistic context is equally important in revealing immanent ideological positions. Therefore, since authors of texts “are unable to express what they want to communicate in a fully explicit way,” the examination of these implicit assumptions can uncover a common frame of reference, i.e. ideology (ibid.). This premise is at the core of my approach as well: as a “societal treatment study” (Garrett 2010: 142), my study focuses on examining manifestations of language ideologies through the texts’ (i.e. games) constitutive, linguistic metarepresentations.

What can we expect to find, then? Although people can have varying attitudes towards different aspects of language, for the general public and many pundits one notion often seems crystal clear: the “right” or proper way to use language, which is often justified by nothing more than simply “common sense” (Peterson 2020: 19). As Milroy and Milroy (2012: 11) note, many opinions about language “have to do with social stratification and cultural conditioning. Some dialects of a language are considered more ‘beautiful’ than others; some languages are widely held to be more ‘logical’ than others.” These notions are closely associated with the concept of standard language ideology, which Lippi-Green (2012: 67) defines as

“a bias toward an abstracted, idealized, homogenous spoken language which is imposed and maintained by dominant bloc institutions and which names as its model the written language, but which is drawn primarily from the spoken language of the upper middle class.”

Standard language ideology is upheld first and foremost by societal institutions, most directly by those concerned with education (Milroy & Milroy 2012). But the media has a major – however, more subtle – role to play too, especially in shaping perception and, hence, attitudes towards a variety of social objects (Heaton 2018: 13). Stamou et al. (2015: 216–217) point out that media processes contributing to standard language ideology work “by glorifying a prestigious linguistic code and undermining a socially stigmatised one.” And indeed, social stratification in conjunction with linguistic variation typically leads to “better-or-worse assessments [...] the net-result is that differences are regularly translated into deficiencies” (Edwards 2009: 68).

Language ideologies, then, are reflected in linguistic metarepresentations within scripted media artifacts as well (Bleichenbacher 2008). For example, in Disney movies, Standard North American and SSBE accents are most prevalent among the main cast, and non-standard accents are mostly utilized, through negative stereotyping, for indexing evil or otherwise antagonistic characters (Lippi-Green 2012). Lippi-Green highlights the potential dangers of these practices, and of standard language ideology in general, by arguing that, since the sociocultural values presented in the films are a constant, they can have a significant cumulative effect on viewers through sheer exposure (ibid.: 103).

Language ideologies can therefore have repercussions beyond the sphere of face-to-face language contact. Kristiansen (2014) draws a distinction between “immediate” and “mediated” language: mediated language, he notes, is not simply language separated from immediate language contact via transfer of modality (into text or recorded speech, for example), but it is also “language that is ‘enmeshed’ in the ideological structures of society at large” (ibid.: 100). Thus, socially and culturally shared ideologies of (a standard) language can be indirectly shaped by mediated representations of language (ibid.: 121–122). It is noteworthy that this concept of a “standard language” can and will vary depending on regional and cultural factors (Edwards 2009: 92) which in turn affect the regard and perceived prestige afforded to certain language varieties.

And indeed, like the film industry, which is heavily based in the US both physically and culturally (Bakker 2008), so are most AAA games produced in and for the North American market. Thus, the cultural backdrop of games’ linguistic standards is correspondingly North American as well, where this “standard variety” is enmeshed in and judged upon very different sociocultural criteria than, say, that in the UK (Milroy & Milroy 2012: 151). Also, language attitude research (Bayard et al. 2001) has shown increasing preference towards Standard North American English at the expense of SSBE, a development that has been concomitant with the proliferation of spoken US-based programs in linguistic settings outside the US (ibid.: 41–43).

2.3 Video Games as Cultural Artifacts

In this section, I discuss video games themselves and some of their aspects relevant for our investigation. I start with a look at some of their characteristic features to contextualize further discussion, and afterwards, I take up the issues of language, linguistic representations and characterization, drawing further parallels between films and video games. Finally, I introduce a few key semiotic processes that “concern the way people conceive links between linguistic forms and social phenomena” (Irvine & Gal 2000: 37).

2.3.1 Structural Elements of AAA Games

How to best contextualize video game narratives, then? Compared to other narrative-driven media, a AAA game’s closest relative is that of the film. A modern video game typically features a movie-like narrative with storytelling and stylistic devices characteristic to cinema, sometimes complemented with high-profile Hollywood actors rendered in nearly photorealistic graphics. Technological advancements, coinciding with the movement of video games into the cultural mainstream, have made games artifacts comparable to other traditional, story-telling media; games have the capacity to tell well written, directed and presented stories (Rudis & Poštić 2018: 133). What sets games apart, however, is their interactivity and gameplay, where they can employ more than simply auditory or visual modes for meaning-making. Indeed, video games can communicate through a multitude of semiotic modes in a variety of “semiotic domains” (Gee 2014), games “situate meaning in a multimodal space through embodied experiences” (ibid.: 48). This entails a kind of reciprocal flexibility within the communicative situation between the game and the player, whose role is elevated beyond that of a simple observer.

From a commercial and player choice perspective, as well, the gaming landscape is highly heterogenic. Games come in a variety of genres, ranging from action, adventure, strategy – some games might require quick reflexes while other might require analytical thinking and strategic planning, a process that has been referred to as “ergodic work” (Bateman et al. 2017: 105–106). Unlike films, genres of games can be conceptualized as an amalgamation of gameplay (ludic) elements as well as their theme and/or subject matter. It is therefore possible, for example, to have a horror game that bases its gameplay on action and combat, or one that is based on stealth and avoiding dangers. Indeed, the gameplay itself – how and why the player interacts with the medium – can vary greatly from game to game. Some games are linear, while others can be truly open-ended, with mostly players’ imaginations setting the limits for how they interact with the game

world. Ensslin (2012: 143) reconciles the differences between a story and game-specific structural elements by using a more accurate, self-explanatory term of “exploratory storyworlds.”

Games are nonetheless designed experiences (Gee 2016) and indeed, when examining elements typical to AAA games, consistent structural elements emerge: these games typically lean towards more contained story-telling, and they often involve a strand of narrative that the player has to go through in order to advance and complete the primary story arc of the game (often the “main story” in gamer lingo). These stories typically follow the Aristotelian three-act structure with a beginning, middle and end (Ensslin 2012: 145), although many games allow the player to keep playing and exploring the world after this story ends. Movie-like sequences (known as “cutscenes”), where the player is relegated to an observer, are often interspersed between bouts of gameplay: they are used to introduce and move forward elements of the plot, thereby functioning as a structural device.

With games, it is “the multimodal properties of these artefacts [that] are absolutely constitutive for their functionality” (Bateman et al. 2017: 45). This multimodality results in an interactive experience, where established semiotic modes can create meaning on their own and as combined (Hawreliak 2019: 233), and accordingly, theories of multimodality form one of the core approaches to the contemporary study of videogame discourse. The semiotic context of my study however, is fairly “traditional,” i.e. audiovisual or “filmic” (ibid.: 228), in the sense that I study one structural element, narrative-based language and linguistic metarepresentations, that is not much affected by the games’ idiosyncratic and/or interactive elements. I discuss these representations next.

2.3.2 Linguistic Representations in Entertainment Media

The language of gaming encompasses multiple layers of discourse, including but not limited to discourse about games by gamers, industry professionals, parents, etc., as well as the language within games, such as in user interfaces and dialogue (Ensslin 2012: 6). It is with the latter that I am concerned with in this study; more specifically, the linguistic representations and their assignments within the metadiscourses of the games themselves.

Language use in scripted entertainment media is an important part of their design that can be used to move the story forward, connect the audience to the media product in various ways – and most importantly, variation of language “adds substantially to the exposition, particularly of characters and their various identities” (Queen 2015: 154). However, this metalanguage use, and dialogue especially, is always a result of a “language planning process” (Bleichenbacher 2012: 156),

including decisions by the producers, writers, actors, dialogue coaches, etc., whose input all form constitutive elements of the final product. More importantly, the end result reflects and transports prevailing ideologies of language (ibid.:157). Therefore, film (and game) dialogue can and should be examined with this in mind, as audiovisual representations are built upon ideologically charged semiotic choices (Goorimoorthee et al. 2019: 272) that form the artifact's "implicit frame of reference" (Blommaert & Verschueren 1998: 357). In his study, Bleichenbacher (2008; 2012) addresses films, but as mentioned above, the design processes for AAA games can be remarkably similar, so the aforementioned ideological frames of reference can safely be assumed to be found, in our case, in the that of the language of video games as well.

It is common for audiovisual narratives, especially those set in native English contexts, that the actors adopt an accent (of English) of the language they wish to portray (Lippi-Green 2012: 109). Indeed, exact linguistic replication of, say, an Egyptian living in 30 BCE would naturally be impossible. Bleichenbacher (2012: 167) calls this a "replacement strategy," and he, too, notes that these practices are common, yet not always appreciated, "especially if [audience members'] linguistic biography prompts them to contest what they consider a disappointingly unrealistic reflection of sociolinguistic realities" (ibid.). These strategies and the choices they imply can be considered through translation theory's concepts of "foreignization" and "domestication" (Munday 2016: 225–226), which entail the juxtaposition of culturally and socially distant or proximate ways of representation. Linguistically, foreignization can take place via accent or foreign language use, whereas domestication is achieved through employing familiar cultural norms of language (as well). These processes, then, are closely related to the choices between non-standard and standard forms of language, respectively.

Through these choices a game narrative's *linguistic matrix* is constructed, which encompasses the represented languages, their relationships and norms of use. This in turn affects how language use that falls beyond it is perceived against its normative, interpretative context. As Goorimoorthee et al. (2019: 272) put it, "[i]n games and other audiovisual media, the use of speech generates a matrix of predominant accent use, [...] Accents that fall outside these matrices are, as a result, marked in that they represent deviations from the norm, and this gives rise to semiotic processes of othering." In addition to contextualizing accent variation, then, these matrices are part and parcel of a game's "world-building" – they are naturally based on the pertinent setting and/or the subject matter of the narrative, and a certain locale or region might beget a certain type of representation. The purported realism of these settings is important: while games can certainly have stylistic connections to animations and/or cartoons, it is film and (mainstream) movies that form a closer connection to the

games in my data and the language use therein. And although language use in games might be a new area of inquiry, the study of representations in films is well established.

Hollywood has a long history of negative and stereotypical portrayals of many different ethnic and minority groups (Cones 2012), including racial, sexual and political bias. Studying multilingualism in Hollywood films, Bleichenbacher (2008) found that English is more often associated with scenes depicting prestigious settings and social activities that are characterized by positive moods, whereas foreign languages are associated with their opposites. Lawless (2014), studying James Bond films, found that the metadiscourse(s) promote “negative stereotyping with regard to the use and the speakers of Russian language” (ibid.: 94). Like Hollywood films, major game titles are “widely understood to construct and perpetuate stereotypes of gender, race, nationality, history and other contended ideological content” (Ensslin 2012: 37). As previously discussed, many big-budget games draw from films not only their narrative tropes, but their modes of semiotic communication as well (with regard to acting, cinematography, etc.). Therefore, contrasting the mainstream video game industry with Hollywood is far from unreasonable.

The representations of sociolinguistic realities between films and games can differ, however. Unlike television dramas, for example, that base their sociolinguistic context solely on the real world, games like this are quite rare; one often finds elements of fantasy, science fiction, etc. in games, even when the context of the story is based on reality. This brings to the fore an important distinction regarding accents and their connection to the world of the narrative: it is to be expected that characters in a certain region based on the real world speak with a corresponding regional accent, but how do characters speak when they inhabit outer space or the mythological Norse land of Midgard, for example? In other words, is a character’s accent (at least to a degree) justified by narrative means, or does it mainly draw from convention and/or stereotypical representations? Examples of both types of narratives are present in my data, and I hypothesize that it is the latter through which we can witness the clearest manifestations of language attitudes in games. I return to this topic in my Methods chapter.

How do accents and variation thereof relate to the characters themselves, then? Quite a bit, as “[t]he use and manipulation of language variation to establish character are long established practices in storytelling” (Lippi-Green 2012: 104). This means that attitudes and stereotypes associated with certain languages, dialects or varieties are an inherent part of language use, even in the scripted context of film or game dialogue. Or as Edwards puts it: “[t]he perceived incongruities that produce comedy on the stage and elsewhere would not be effective without an audience fully alive to the powerful social connotations of linguistic variants” (2009: 95).

Finally, I mention a few key semiotic processes outlined by Irvine and Gal (2000) that “concern the way people conceive of links between linguistic forms and social phenomena” (ibid.: 37). These processes are *iconization*, *fractal recursivity* and *erasure*, and they have been utilized in the study of media representations, as well (Bleichenbacher 2008; Ensslin 2010; Goorimoorthee et al. 2019). In iconization, the linguistic sign appears to become representative of the social group it indexes, unifying possibly conventional or contingent linguistic features as inherent, or iconic, symbols of the group. Fractal recursivity entails the projection of a semantic opposition onto another opposition functioning at a different level. For example, a physically clumsy character might be “clumsy” in their use of language as well. Lastly, erasure refers to a process where social groups or activities are rendered invisible through ideology, by disregarding otherwise salient variation or “erasing” elements incongruent with the prevailing ideological model. Iconization, especially, is pertinent for my analysis, since the objects of my study, accents and archetypes, are two – at least seemingly – separate concepts. Next, I move on to bringing together what we have covered so far by discussing attitudes and the media.

2.4 Language, Attitudes and the Media

Lippi-Green (2012) argues that media representations in television, movies, etc. can influence attitudes by associating certain varieties of language with stereotypical and/or negative attributes of the represented characters. Heaton (2018: 2), in her experimental IAT-test study on media’s effects on language attitudes, found evidence of influence, but the effect varied depending on whether testing for explicit or implicit attitudes. Her participants, however, were native Southern US English speakers gauging attitudes towards their local varieties. But how often does a Southern US speaker *actually* encounter someone speaking with a Scottish accent, for instance? This type of language contact often takes place through the media as “parasocial contact” (Heaton 2018: 10), facilitated by the easy availability of electronic entertainment media (ibid.: 13). So when it comes to geographically distant accents, especially, it is safe to assume that for many people they are, for the most part, experienced through the media and media only.

Although language change mostly takes place through direct, interpersonal contact, i.e. “immediate language” (Kristiansen 2014), it has been shown that parasocial interactions, which include witnessing character interactions on the screen, can elicit emotional and functional responses not unlike those experienced in face-to-face contact (Heaton 2018: 10). Kristiansen (2014) argues that the media, while not directly responsible for language change, can affect the views and attitudes

towards the local standard variety (i.e. standard language ideology). Moreover, media representations can be a useful source of tracking language change in general (Queen 2015: 48), highlighting the close relationship between immediate and mediated language that can belie their seemingly separate nature: Heaton (2018) notes that although a direct relationship between the media and language change is tenuous, with studies often facing many confounding factors and giving correspondingly mixed results, attitudes themselves may be the key mediating factor.

Engagement with a television program, for example, can encourage uptake of linguistic forms not native to a speaker's dialect (ibid.: 11). With video games, engagement is an even more significant part of the experience – this is an important point, since “[t]ransportation and narrative engagement seem to facilitate attitudinal and behavioral effects [...] audiences' involvement with a story is associated with endorsement of story-consistent beliefs” (Hall & Zwarun 2012: 387). In addition, the perceived authenticity of a narrative can affect viewer perception: a high level of realism can facilitate engagement and vice versa (Busselle & Bilandzic 2008). While my study approaches video game characters first and foremost through their archetypes, I also consider the game narratives' connection(s) to the real world, i.e. their “external realism” (ibid.: 256), as a contextualizing factor for my analysis of the characters and their archetypes (see Methods chapter).

Games, like any other fictional media, are “complex representational, textual and media phenomena that carry multilayered ideological content” (Ensslin 2012: 31). With immersion in a game, then, one is inevitably exposed to some of this underlying ideological content, regardless of psychosocial factors that might affect one's implicit or explicit reaction(s) to it. Furthermore, with games being a multi-sensory medium, the immersive interaction with a game can potentially obstruct individual semiotic modes, therefore increasing ideological susceptibility (Ensslin 2010: 210).

The target demographic of a media product is another important factor affecting audience reception and media effects thereon. In their research on children's cartoons, Stamou et al. (2015: 218) point out that children as young as five show considerable sociolinguistic awareness of many relevant factors (e.g. differences between regional dialects or appropriateness of register). They preface this notion by saying that: “given the fact that contemporary social life is ‘textually mediated’, it is highly possible that many children shape their ideas about sociolinguistic diversity (e.g. geographical dialects), based merely, or mostly, on what they receive from those texts” (ibid.: 217; similarly argued by Lippi-Green 2012). And although children are not the target demographic for the games in my data, similar assumptions on their media effects are not totally unreasonable.

All of the games in my data are primarily aimed at late teens and adults (16+ or 18+ in Europe). It should be mentioned, however, that this does not mean that minors do not play these games: DeCamp (2019: 195) reminds us that not only is there little empirical evidence on the matter, as the data might be hard to acquire (do children admit to playing adult games?), but there are many ways to purchase these games digitally that do not require a credit card, and any age verification there might be present can be easily circumvented. In the US, for example, the ratio of physical/digital sales has been turned around in a matter of 10 years (80/20% in 2009 to 17/83% in 2018, respectively)². Simple statistics indicate that minors too can play adult games fairly easily.

The essential observation, nonetheless, is that attitude adoption, via the media or otherwise, is not a straightforward or one-way “absorption” process, and that many factors, including viewer traits and previously primed information (Heaton 2018: 135), may dictate much of said representation’s real-life effects. Indeed, when it comes to perception and evaluation of accents in media, audiences are not simply passive observers. In his study looking at linguicism in Hollywood movies, Bleichenbacher (2012: 172) found that while representation of sociolinguistic realities may be stereotypical, audiences do question and debate them, discursively forming their own opinions in the process. He also noted, among some audiences, acceptance and even enthusiasm towards not only multilingualism, but also to the (linguistic) fidelity of actors’ performances and the movie’s sociolinguistic context (ibid.).

These reactions stem from multiple different demographical as well as personal and psychosocial factors: in a study of a stigmatized pronunciation feature in rural Greece and its media representations, Pappas (2008) found that factors such as age, gender, education and awareness of the stigma associated with the variant all had an effect on usage and attitudes towards it. All in all, however, linguistic representations in media artifacts cannot be labeled insignificant regarding their power to shape individual and cultural perception, and hence, attitudes. And indeed, since standard language ideology is a key element of our discussion, it should be noted that, via the media, virtually everyone is exposed to standard forms of language (Edwards 2009: 95). The media, however, should never be seen as the sole propagator of attitudes, linguistic or otherwise, but rather as one of many affecting factors (Heaton 2018: 10). With that being said, media representations of language, such as the ones in my study, are nonetheless exposed to millions of people from all over the world, which makes the explication of their underlying, ideological elements that much more important.

² <https://www.statista.com/statistics/190225/digital-and-physical-game-sales-in-the-us-since-2009/>

2.5 Character Archetypes in Fictional Narratives

Among the most influential studies of morphological elements of folk- and fairytales is Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1968), where Propp constructs a typology of structural and functional elements common to most folktales around the world. With regard to the characters in a narrative, he delineates the "functions of dramatis personae" (ibid.: 79–80): "hero," "villain," "helper," "donor," "dispatcher," "princess (and her father)" and "false hero." The key notion is that these archetypes are first and foremost *functions* of the narrative, and not the characters specifically. Propp argues that the characters themselves are subordinate to the morphological constituents of the tale itself; the function a character fulfills is derived from how the characters affect the tale, typically through the consequences of their actions (ibid.: 67).

Of these archetypes, the first five are applicable for my study, as the last two, the "princess" and the "false hero" were very rare in my data, especially as the most primary archetypes of a single character. Also, some narrative functions are often fulfilled by collective forces or actors beyond the characters themselves (Ensslin 2012: 147). For instance, the *princess* archetype (an object of desire) is rarely an actual princess, but rather an abstract state or a goal (self-actualization or the end of tyranny, for example). What we are left with are the *hero*, *villain*, *helper*, *donor* and *dispatcher*. I explicate these archetypes in more detail in the next chapter.

It is through these archetypes, then, that I construct my main approach to the linguistic representations within the games in my data. As such, my main concern is not with how specific characters use language, but rather which narrative roles these characters fulfill – and therefore, which roles are certain accents ascribed to (or not). To put it simply: do heroes' accents differ from those of villains', for example. This level of analysis allows me to move beyond the characters themselves and uncover patterns of use between linguistic representations and the structural functions within the narrative. I return to my practical application of Propp's typology in the Methods chapter.

Finally, I present my hypotheses. They are adapted from the results of earlier research (Lippi-Green 2012; Bleichenbacher 2008; Ensslin 2010; Goorimoorthee et al. 2019) that I discussed previously in this chapter. Here it should be mentioned that much of this research has classified characters by their other represented qualities, whereas I approach the characters through their narrative functions (archetypes). While there are some commonalities, these analytical tools are not entirely comparable, and thus my hypotheses are based more on the general findings from this previous research, which I loosely adapt to my archetypal framework. My hypotheses are as follows:

1. Standard North American English is the most prominent accent overall and it is especially prevalent among “hero” characters.
2. More prestigious standard accents other than SNAm (e.g. SSBE) are mostly reserved for relatively more important supporting characters, “villains” especially.
3. Other, less prestigious accents of are reserved for minor characters: the “helpers,” “donors” and the “villain’s” minions, for example.
4. The above observations show up stronger when the narrative context does not justify the choice of accent(s), i.e. if the game is based in a fictional world, as opposed to a real-world location or setting.

3. Materials and Methods

In this chapter I introduce my data and methodological framework. I start with a look at the games themselves and then explain the character selection and coding process. Afterwards, I explicate the salient features of the archetypes and accents in my data. Finally, I look at how the games' narrative settings are coded and utilized in my analysis.

3.1 Materials

My data consist of 25 AAA (*Triple-A*) videogames for the PlayStation 4, including five best-selling titles from every year between 2014 and 2018, but including only games with clear main narratives (thereby excluding sports games, etc.). To reiterate, AAA games are the big-budget blockbusters of the gaming industry, often created by teams of dozens if not hundreds of employees, each specializing in a certain part of the production (visual art, programming, sound design, etc.). Since AAA games are the target of my study, I hereafter refer to them when talking about “games,” unless otherwise specified.

I chose the top five games for each of the five years based on global sales figures from *vgchartz.com*³, a site that aggregates sales data from various sources. Utilizing a source like *vgchartz* was convenient but also necessary, since publishers do not always share exact sales figures (especially if the game performed below expectations). *Vgchartz* acknowledges that their figures are estimates, but even with a margin of error the list of most popular games would likely have changed little, if at all.

The reason that I focus on AAA games, and the top sellers specifically, is twofold: First, they tend to be the bigger productions, whose budgets allow for more varied and realistic linguistic representations, whereas smaller, independent titles often utilize merely text as their chosen mode of linguistic output. This is partly because higher production values afford quality voice acting, with accents and linguistic guises certainly being included in the design process. Second, of all games in general that do feature voice acting, the individual top grossing titles typically fall into the category of AAA games.

³ <https://www.vgchartz.com/games/games.php?console=PS4>

3.2 Methods

Playing through each game, I selected up to 10 characters most relevant to the game's main story, starting from what I deemed to be the most important character and moving my way towards characters of lesser importance. I judged this "importance" based on the characters' contribution(s) to the game's main narrative and, when in between two or more choices, their relative "screen-time" and amount of spoken dialogue. However, I excluded very minor characters that had either a weak archetypal connection to the story or only a few lines of dialogue (even in cases where the character tally fell short of the maximum ten). In other words, only the characters most central to the main narrative of a game were to be analyzed.

After obtaining this list of 10 characters or less, I coded each character for an archetype that best matched their functional role within the narrative. In Propp's typology of archetypes (1968: 80–81), a character can occupy multiple spheres of action, i.e. functions, and/or shift between them. However, for analytical utility, I coded the characters *only* for their most primary function. So for example, a villain that ends up helping the hero at the very end would still be a villain, since the character's primary or most significant functional contribution to the narrative is that of "villainy" or "a fight or other forms of struggle with the hero" (Propp 1968: 79).

Here it should be noted that, due to their interactive and open-ended nature, extracting data from games is often eclectic by necessity (Ensslin 2012), and so it was with my data as well. A game's narrative can include potentially dozens, if not hundreds of voice-acted characters of varying importance and narrative functions; what or whom the player encounters and interacts with might depend on choices made during gameplay. The number of archetypes, too, can vary from game to game. I thus decided against choosing a set number of archetypes per game, and rather opted to focus only on the primary characters of the main narrative. It is therefore possible that another person might have at times picked another character than I did. However, most game narratives' core "cast" (as in films) rarely exceeds 10 people, so it is unlikely that the choices for major characters would be much different. In narratives with branching paths that change a character's archetype, I coded only those characters that do not change functions; in *Fallout 4*, for example, the player has to ally with one of four different factions, turning the others hostile and reorganizing the archetypes of many characters. Also, as I classified characters upon their narrative functions, any narrators or other such extra-narrative speakers were excluded.

I also coded the characters for gender for clarity's sake. However, my analytical process did not take this variable into account and my approach towards the archetypes was entirely gender-neutral.

Therefore, a “hero” and a “heroine,” for example, are both in a single category. To reiterate, the pertinent archetype categories for the characters are: *hero*, *villain*, *helper*, *donor* and *dispatcher*. Finally, I coded each character for the accent of English they speak in. I delineate both of these categories in the next sections.

3.3 The Archetypes

In this section, I explicate the archetypes and their functions, especially in how they relate to my data and video games in general (adapted from Propp 1968: 79–80).

“The hero”: This is the function the tale revolves around, which typically follows the endeavors and the development of the hero. In video game terms, the hero virtually always equates to the character the player takes control of. This also means that most often there is a singular hero character in one game, however, some games feature multiple protagonists one controls at different points of the narrative. Hence, there might occasionally be more than one hero.

“The villain”: These are the characters whose functions are to either set the stage for the hero’s journey, through acts of villainy, or to engage in a struggle or pursue the hero, setting the impetus for both the hero’s movement and, typically, an eventual triumph. Games typically feature a few major villains.

“The helper”: These characters assist the hero in their quest, for example by providing helpful information, dealing with enemies (often alongside the hero), transporting them spatially or rescuing them from danger. In short, the helpers aid the hero in overcoming obstacles and adversity. Helpers are most often the protagonist’s allies of some sort, although morally more ambiguous helpers with motivations of their own can be found as well.

“The donor”: The donor is a character who prepares or provides the hero with a “magical agent” that the hero can use to advance their quest. These aides can be willing or antagonistic – the main point is their functional connection to the helpful items they provide. In a simpler sense, then, the donor often acts as a helper who provides items or equipment of some kind to the hero, instead of their own help.

“The dispatcher”: This character fulfills the function that “brings the hero into the tale” (Propp 1968: 36). They give the hero reason(s) to set on their journey, either through making some misfortune known or alternatively through requesting or commanding the hero. Whereas classic fairytales often include a singular dispatcher, in video games, with their multi-layered and -phased

narratives, they are often much more numerous. As such, in video games dispatchers are often (and appropriately) known as “quest givers.”

3.4 The Accents

My categorization of accents is based primarily on Trudgill and Hannah’s (2017) typology of international standard English accents as well as Hughes et al.’s (2013) overview of British accents (with a few exceptions, see below). Many of the accents in my data are either regional, ethnic or social dialects in native language contexts, whose features are well documented in linguistic research. However, many of the less represented accents, especially, are regional EFL (English as a foreign language) accents, e.g. Russian, Italian, Latin American Spanish, that I match with their general geographic region to the best of my ability. The list of all accents in my data can be found in Table 1.

For both analytical and practical purposes, I utilize the typology in a broad sense and do not account for in-category variation, although many accents can exhibit significant variation (SSBE being a good example; Hughes et al. 2013). So for instance, any typical features of SSBE would be enough to place the accent in that category, or Northern and Southern Irish English would be classified as simply “Irish.” Not only would in-depth analysis of all 232 instances of accents be beyond the scope of this paper, but the use of broader categories, grouping together geographically or phonologically similar accents, is beneficial for analytical utility. The full list of characters, along with their pertinent archetypes and accents, can be found in Appendix 1.

Also, it should be noted that often times the accents being represented are interpretations or adaptations (for instance, Laura Bailey, an American actress, puts on a South African English accent in *Uncharted 4*). Thus, it should be stated that, at times, the accents might not be entirely accurate representations of their inspirations. However, since my main focus is on the distributions of accents among the archetypes, for my purposes the *intended* accent is ultimately more important than exact linguistic fidelity.

A few accent groups in my data warrant explication. First, some categories include multiple “neighboring” accents, and second, some groups might not be actual accents associated with a specific real-life region, but rather amalgamations of features common to languages in certain parts of the world: in my data these would be the African and Arabic accents. In addition, I include a category for “stylized” accents. I explain these exceptions and their salient features below.

Standard North American English (SNAm): includes both General American and Standard Canadian English accents. These accents are quite similar, differentiated primarily by the *cot-caught* merger and diphthong raising in Canadian English. Within the confines of acted game dialogue, these accents might be difficult to distinguish, therefore I group them into one category.

Stylized North American (StylNAm): Among SNAm accents, there were enough instances of stylized accents to warrant their own category. The common denominator of these accents is that the basic vowel phonology is based on North American English, but each has a stylized feature that sets it apart from standard SNAm (phonologically). Examples include a scientist mutated by radiation (Virgil in *Fallout 4*), who systematically replaces [s] with [ʃ]; an artificial intelligence with a digitized, yet distinctly North American, voice (Corvus in *Call of Duty: Black Ops III*); an 18th century Canadian (New France) assassin with retroflex [ɹ] replacing the standard [r] (Pierre Bellec in *Assassin's Creed Unity*). This does not mean, of course, that other accents in the data exhibit no stylistic variation – but here the differences are pronounced and systematic enough that they can be seen as deviating from their “maternal accent” (SNAm, in this case). For the purposes of my discussion, however, I treat these accents as North American, as the effect is mostly that of “flavor” or characterization, not of a different accent altogether.

Southern Standard British English (SSBE): includes the standard variety of southern Britain and its variants. Therefore, this category is synonymous with RP (Received Pronunciation), but I use SSBE for its “less evaluative” qualities (Hughes et al. 2013: 3). However, I differentiate “Estuary English” from this category, which refers a group of middle-class accents from southeastern UK counties (Trudgill & Hannah 2017: 22) and is not “separate” from SSBE in any essential way. However, its most distinctive feature, glottal stops [ʔ] for /t/ in certain contexts (Hughes et al. 2013: 6), give these representations quite a different effect. As with stylized North American accents, I treat these as Standard British accents for the purposes of my general discussion.

Here it should be noted that analysis of rhythmic and intonation patterns are beyond the scope of my paper, although they can be important characteristics of many accents (Hughes et al. 2013; Trudgill & Hannah 2017), and in my data this is especially true for Arabic and African accents. Also, these two accents are the ones in my data that seem to be mostly amalgamations of broader regional features, and as such, they might be closer to media adaptations than other accents. I outline some of their distinct/non-standard features below.

African accent: an aspirated, non-rhotic accent. Where rhoticity is present, alveolar approximant [ɹ] becomes an alveolar trill [r]; *the* is pronounced as [ðɪ] instead of [ðə]; certain diphthongs are monophthongized, e.g. *cake* is [ke:k], *boat* is [bo:t] and *home* is [ho:m]; [œ] becomes [æ], e.g. *curse* is [kæ:s] instead of [kœ:s].

Arabic accent: a non-aspirated, rhotic accent with a highly characteristic intonation pattern. Phonologically its most distinct feature is the alveolar approximant [ɹ] becoming an alveolar trill [r].

Unclear accents: in a few (n=4) instances, a character's accent proved to be inconclusive. These were characters that might shift between two accents, or instances where the accent was so heavily stylized that the end result defied categorization. I simply excluded these characters from the analysis. I also excluded characters that did not speak English (n=1) or did not speak at all (n=5).

3.5 Narrative Setting

After compiling the list of characters with their archetypes and accents, I examined the game's world and narrative setting. I coded each game as either *real* or *fictional* (henceforth also *n-real* for real and *n-fictional* for fictional narratives, respectively). I coded the game narrative as *real* if it included either

a) referent(s) in the real world, such as regions or events (e.g. the state of Montana, US; New York City, NY; World War II),

OR

b) a semi-real setting that is clearly derived from the real world (e.g. fictional US states with recognizable landmarks; the city of "Los Santos," modeled after Los Angeles, CA).

Otherwise I coded the narrative setting as *fictional*. Examples of fictional narrative settings include fantasy worlds (*The Witcher 3*; *Monster Hunter: World*), fictional American cities (Gotham City in *Batman: Arkham Knight*) and futuristic scenarios in space and beyond (*Destiny*, *Star Wars Battlefront 2*). The end result is, simply put, that *real* narratives are either situated in or have a tangible connection to the real world, while *fictional* narratives do not. After my archetype-accent - analysis, I employ the *n-real* vs. *n-fictional* categories to see if they affect the prevalence of any or all accents.

4. Results

In this chapter I present the results of my quantitative analysis. I begin with a view of the general division of accents across the data. I then move to the level of archetype, examining them each together and then one by one. Finally, I contrast these results against the narrative setting(s) of the game(s). I focus primarily on the numeric results here – in-depth analysis and discussion can be found in the next chapter.

4.1 A General Overview

The general frequency of accents forms a good starting point. Table 1 presents the distribution of accents among all characters across all games: 232 characters/archetypes across 25 games in total.

The results show that Standard North American English is by far the most prevalent accent, making up for over half of all accents present in my data (n=126, 54% of total). SSBE is the next numerous accent (n=41, 18% of total): while clearly less prevalent than SNA, it is more numerous by a large margin as compared to other, less represented accents. African American English (n=15, 6% of total) and stylized North American accents are worth mentioning as well (n=14, 6%). The rest include both native (L1) and non-native (L2) accents of English, most of them in the low 3's, and all with a frequency of 3% or less of the total number of accents.

It is noteworthy that, despite a strong North American presence, the only two ethnic or regional US dialects are AAE and Southern US – which are arguably among the two most recognizable dialects in the US (Preston 1999; Peterson 2020). For example, there were no instances of Northeastern English (Eastern New England and New York City) in my data. Standard North American English, then, is not only dominant, but it seems to be so much at the expense of (potential) regional or ethnic variation.

Table 1: General division of accents of English, all games & all characters, in order of prevalence

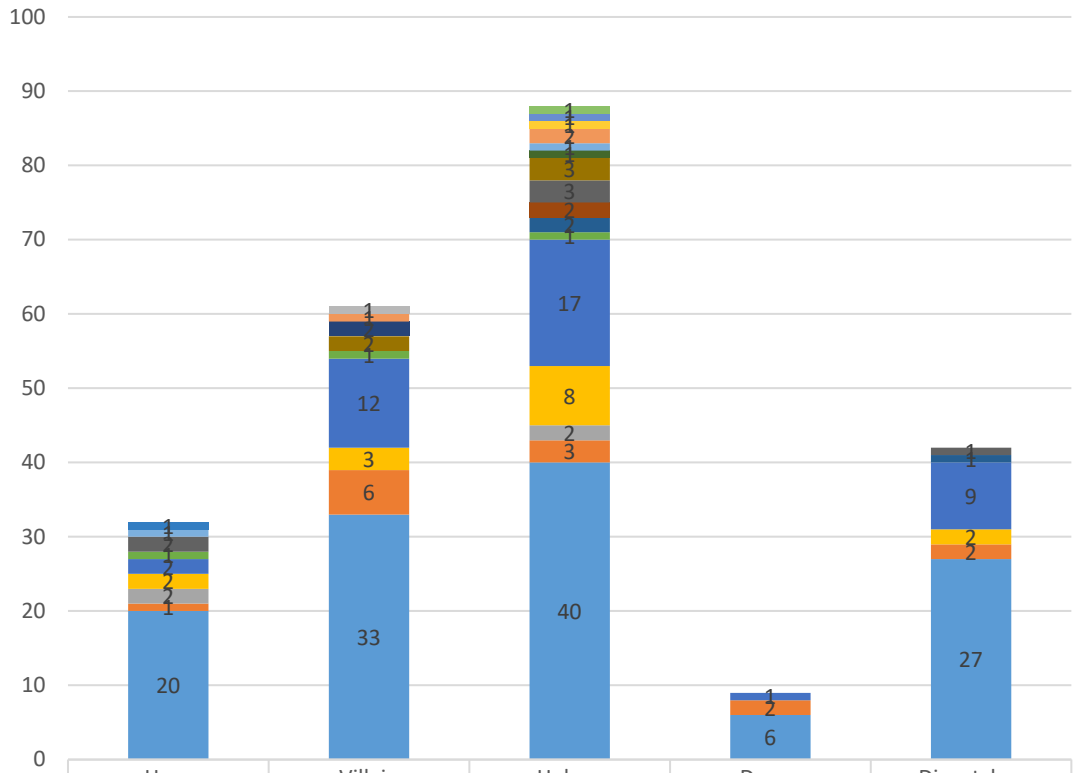
Accent of English	Instances (n)	Acronym (if applicable for further discussion)
Standard North American English (Includes General American and General Canadian)	126	SNAm
Southern Standard British English (“RP”)	41	SSBE
African American English (includes AAVE)	15	AAE; AAVE when with vernacular features
North American English (stylized)	14	StylNAm
African	6	
Arabic	5	
Southern US English	4	
Estuary English	3	
Latin American Spanish	3	
Scottish	3	
Australian	2	
Irish	2	
Southeast Asian	2	
French	1	
French Canadian	1	
Italian	1	
Indian	1	
Russian	1	
South African	1	

4.2 Archetypes and Divisions of Accents

Let us now turn to the archetypes themselves to see how these general observations stand up when compared with specific roles in the narrative(s). Figure 1 shows the numeric tally of characters in each archetype category, as well as the division of accents among them. Before discussing language, we can take a quick look at the number of archetypes in my data. The “helper” is the most numerous one (n=88), followed by the “villain” (n=61), then the “dispatcher” (n=42) and then the “hero” (n=32). “Donors” are visibly fewer in number (n=9) – I explicate this in the category’s own subsection below.

Next, I look at each archetype category in turn and discuss some of their distinctive features. For these sections, Figure 2 shows the relative percentages of accents within that archetype, with numbers over the bar indicating the instances of characters with that particular archetype/accent combination. Here it should be noted that, henceforth, I frequently discuss accents other than SNAm and SSBE as a group: I refer to them in the text as “LowRep” accents, as their one common denominator is that of low representation across my data.

Archetypes by Accent



	Hero	Villain	Helper	Donor	Dispatcher
Italian	1	0	0	0	0
Russian	0	0	1	0	0
French Canadian	0	0	1	0	0
French	0	0	1	0	0
South African	0	1	0	0	0
Latin Am. Spanish	0	1	2	0	0
Australian	1	0	1	0	0
Indian	0	0	1	0	0
SE Asian	0	2	0	0	0
Arabic	0	2	3	0	0
African	2	0	3	0	1
Irish	0	0	2	0	0
Scottish	0	0	2	0	1
Estuary English	1	1	1	0	0
SSBE	2	12	17	1	9
AAE	2	3	8	0	2
Southern US	2	0	2	0	0
StylINAm	1	6	3	2	2
SNAmerican	20	33	40	6	27

- SNAmerican
- StylINAm
- Southern US
- AAE
- SSBE
- Estuary English
- Scottish
- Irish
- African
- Arabic
- SE Asian
- Indian
- Australian
- Latin Am. Spanish
- South African
- French
- French Canadian
- Russian
- Italian

Figure 1: Division of accents by archetype, numerical tally

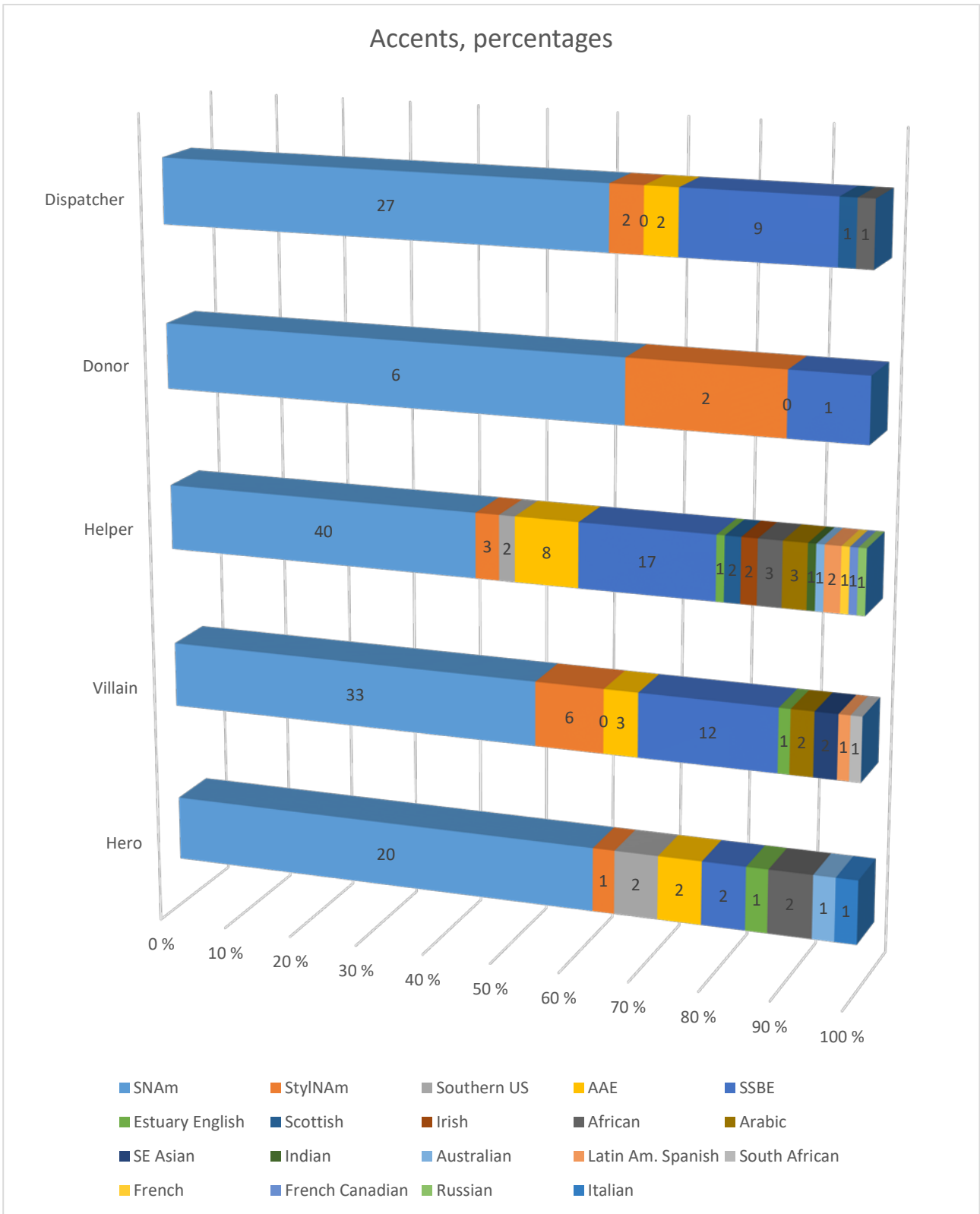


Figure 2: Division of accents by archetype in percentages, (n) indicated on the bar

4.2.1 The Hero

Of the “hero” archetypes, 63% feature SNAm (n=20) and the remaining part is fairly equally divided between other accents (n=1 or 2). The “hero” archetype is therefore clearly dominated by the accent of Standard North American English and no other, with the rest of the accents each having barely a tenth of SNAm’s representation.

All in all, the results for the “hero” archetype indicate that Standard North American English, i.e. the standard in a US context, is certainly being assigned to the “good guys,” although compared to other archetypes, the difference is not as sizeable as one might expect (see next sections).

Simultaneously, however, the lack of other accents is conspicuous, all of which are in the 1’s and 2’s, compared to 20 SNAm heroes. The lack of SSBE among heroes is noticeable, too, since it is fairly prevalent among other archetypes (roughly 20% in other category totals); among heroes, only 2 SSBE-speaking characters were to be found, with around 6% of category total. In summary, heroes feature 63% of SNAm and only about 6% of any other singular accent.

There were also 4 instances of heroes not speaking at all. This can be explained by a fairly long-standing convention in video games, where the main character (especially one the player gets to customize to their liking) is left “mute,” allowing for the player to project their own identity onto the character.

4.2.2 The Villain

In the “villain” category, SNAm is still prevalent, yet slightly less so when compared to the hero, with 54% (n=33) of the category total. I initially presumed that SNAm would be much less prevalent among villains than heroes – this does not seem to be the case, exactly. The “villain” does have lower SNAm representation than “hero” or “dispatcher,” but the effect is not that significant (54% compared to 63% and 64%, respectively). Indeed, it is the “helper” that has the lowest SNAm presence (see next section).

Compared to the “hero,” the relatively large portion of Southern Standard British Accents (20%, n=12) is noteworthy, although somewhat surprisingly, the “helper” and “dispatcher” had similar distributions. However, the “villain’s” representations changed the most when contrasted against the games’ narrative settings, and the above observations are contextualized further below (see “narrative setting” in sections 4.3 and 5.3). In addition, stylized American accents (n=6, 10%) are worth a mention, as their relative prevalence is highest among villains. These are most often

antagonists who have been stylized for characterization, presumably to highlight their villainous nature (e.g. the stereotypical, articulate yet deep-voiced villain, Dominus Ghoul, in *Destiny 2*). Other accents are, as with the hero, mostly in the low 2's (3% of category total). All in all, the “villain” is surprisingly similar to the “helper” and “dispatcher,” a notion I take up in my discussion chapter.

4.2.3 The Helper

With the “helper” archetype, SNAm’s overwhelming presence drops somewhat, coming in at 46% (n=40), and in contrast to other archetypes, the “helper” features a visibly lower portion of SNAm accents, lowest of all accent groups. As with the “villain,” there is a substantial presence of SSBE among helpers, with a 19% representation (n=17).

On the other hand, helpers feature the majority of different LowRep accents and indeed, of all categories, the “helper” seems to be the most “receptive” to them. To put it in another way, minority- or otherwise marked accents are very often assigned to helpers, who tend to occupy secondary or “sidekick”-type roles. The diversity of these more infrequent accents is noteworthy, however, as the LowRep group includes both L1 and L2 accents from all over the world, none of which seem to be utilized specifically over another – with the possible exception of African American English (n=8, 9%). I discuss AAE, as well as minority accents in general, more specifically in the discussion chapter.

4.2.4 The Donor

The “donor” features SNAm strongly as well (67%, n=6), with a few singular instances of stylized American and SSBE accents. However, the “donor” category is considerably smaller than the others – indeed, most of the games in my data did not feature a donor archetype at all. As such, the category loses much of its analytical validity, although a typical representation of SNAm can be seen here as well. Due to this, I no longer include the donor in my discussion, unless otherwise noted.

The low number of donors (providers of magical artifacts, etc.) can likely be attributed to the fact that, in games, it is far more common to develop game mechanics and challenges around obtaining items by which the hero can gain an advantage – whereas in a traditional fairytale, it is less significant where or how the hero obtains tools to assist them in their quest. Furze (2014: 146) notes

that, in games, the level of challenge presented to the player is proportional to the pleasure in overcoming it. This means that having other characters give the hero (or the player, as it were) the means to trivialize adversity might simply be poor game design. Hence, the low number of donors.

4.2.5 The Dispatcher

With regard to the most prevalent accents, the “dispatcher” has similar SNA_m representation (64%, n=27) as the “hero”, and a similar SSBE representation (21%, n=9) as the “villain” and “helper”. However, LowRep characters are all but absent here: only 14% of category total consists of accents besides SNA_m and SSBE, and all of these are, once again, mostly in the low 2’s.

What separates this archetype from the others is its distinct function: the dispatcher “brings the hero into the tale” (Propp 1968: 36–38), setting the tale in motion and providing the impetus for narrative progression and, hence, gameplay. In my data, dispatchers were often authority figures of some sort (e.g. a ruler of a kingdom, commanding officer in a military context, etc.) who give orders or requests to the player. This status might explain the category’s lack of LowRep accents and hence, the relatively higher prevalence of standard accents. SSBE representation among dispatchers, as with villains and helpers, becomes more pronounced in *n-fictional* games (see section 5.3.2).

However, as I alluded to previously, my hypotheses were built upon previous research that had often categorized characters based on the Manichean allegory, i.e. a good-evil axis. The “dispatcher,” of all archetypes, does not exactly fit this mold, as their motivations and functional connections to the story can be quite varied. Besides the aforementioned “authority figure” - dispatchers, other types can exist too, such as a slain loved one that sets the hero off on their quest (e.g. *Fallout 4*; *Assassin’s Creed Origins*). Nonetheless, the distribution of accents in the “dispatcher” category is consistent with the general picture, although its limited number of LowRep accents is still noteworthy.

4.3 Narrative Setting: Real vs. Fictional

In this section I take a closer look at the games’ narrative settings and assess whether this affects the incidence of (any) linguistic representations. Of the games in my data, roughly two thirds (n=17) are in the *n-real* category; the remaining third (n=8) are in the *n-fictional* category. Figure 3 shows the relative allotment of archetype/accent-combinations in games coded as *real*, while Figure 4 is its *fictional* counterpart.

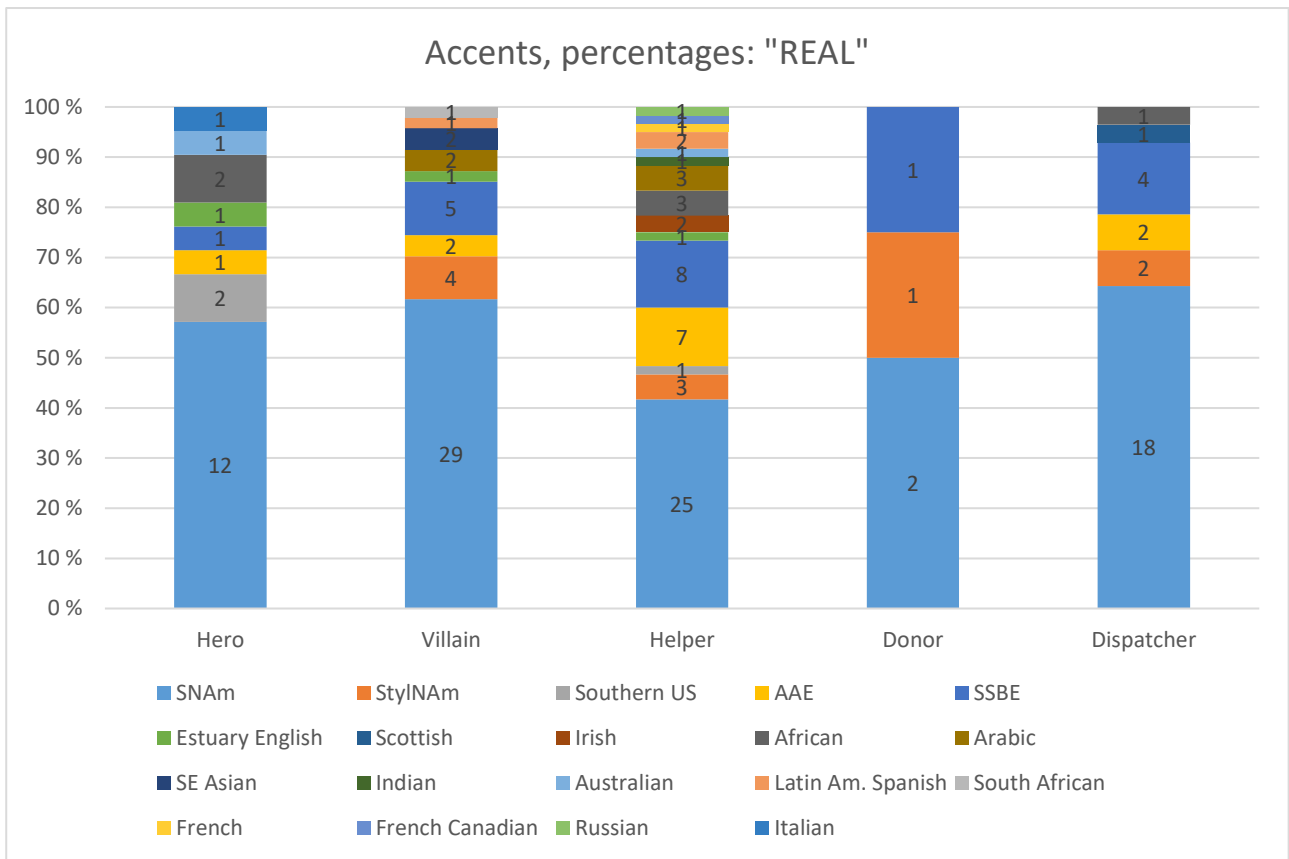


Figure 3: Accent percentages in "real" games, (n) indicated on the bar

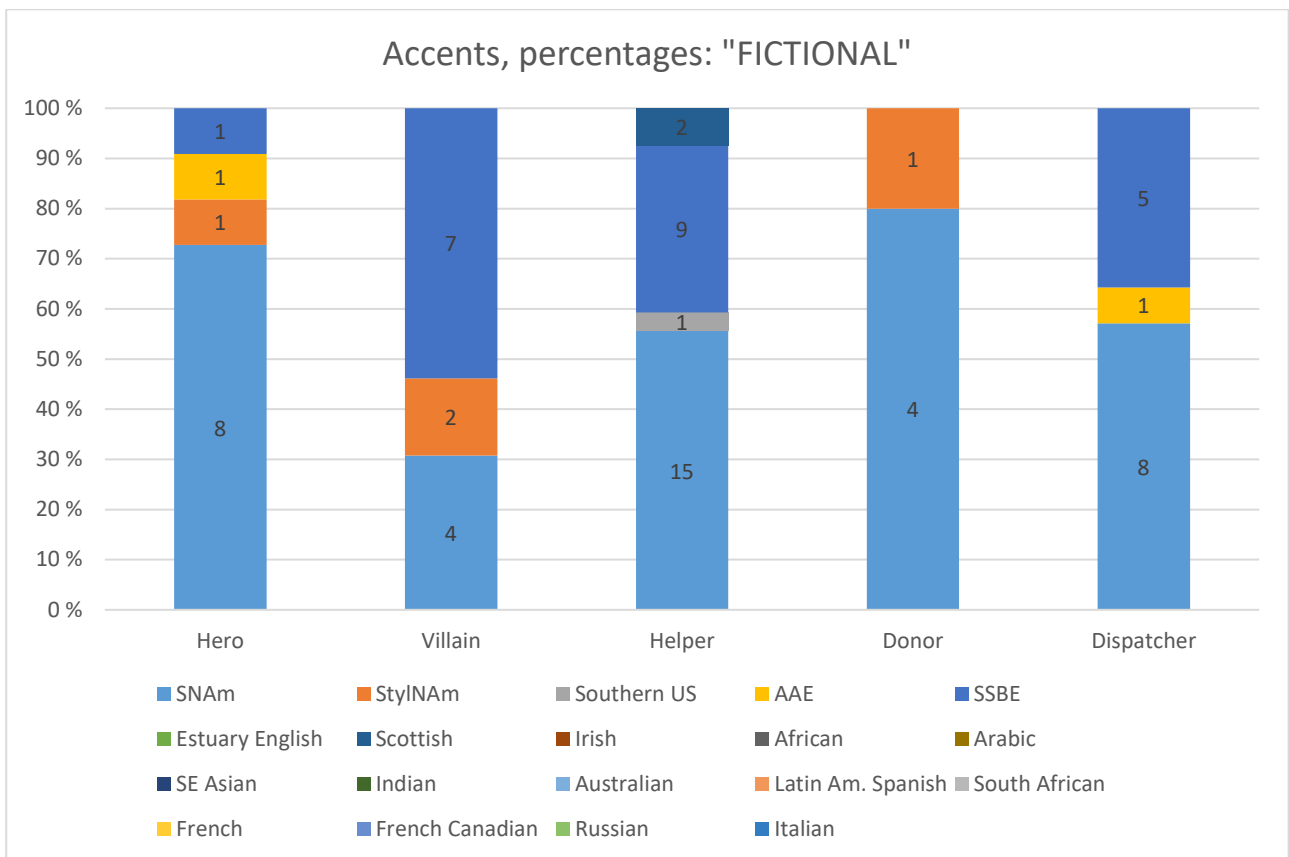


Figure 4: Accent percentages in "fictional" games, (n) indicated on the bar

A few significant notions emerge when the character archetypes and their accents are contrasted against the games' narrative settings. First, all instances of African, Arabic, Australian, Estuary English, French, French Canadian, Irish, Italian, Indian, Latin American Spanish, South African, Southeast Asian and Russian accents (i.e., most of LowRep accents) are featured only in *real* narratives. As previously discussed, their incidence is fairly low, with typically one or two instances even in *n-real* games, but their total absence in *n-fictional* games is highly conspicuous. In numerical terms, of the 19 different accent categories in my data, 13 of them can be found only in *n-real* games. In other words, when moving from real to fictional games, the primacy of SNAm and SSBE grow proportionally even larger, and linguistic diversity is greatly diminished.

Second, the position of SSBE is noteworthy, as it is much more prevalent in *n-fictional* games than in *n-real* ones: among 17 real and 8 fictional games, fictional games actually had numerically *more* SSBE accents. One likely explanation is that, in entertainment media, SSBE has been argued to be “the accent of fantasy” (Goorimoorthee et al. 2019: 281), which naturally often characterizes *n-fictional* games. Besides fantasy worlds, however, the *n-fictional* category features games taking place in space and even a fictional US city – which all still feature SSBE accents. Both above notions, then, are significant and warrant closer examination. I return to them in the next chapter.

Archetype-wise, the difference in narrative setting has effects as well. When moving from *n-real* to *n-fictional* “helper” archetypes, the relative share of SNAm (from 42 to 56%) and SSBE (13 to 33%) both rise significantly, likely due to the aforementioned lack of LowRep accents. It seems that when it comes to *n-fictional* helpers, SNAm and SSBE simply take the place of other accents. The “hero” sees a similar development with SNAm (57 to 73%) but *not* with SSBE (5 to 9% – there is only a singular SSBE-speaking hero in both realism categories).

The opposite effect, however, is particularly dramatic among the “villain”: SNAm representation lowers significantly (62 to 31%) while SSBE rises in turn (11 to 54%). This, too, might be due to *n-fictional* games' lack of LowRep accents, and SSBE, in a sense, taking their place. The “dispatcher” sees similar developments, with lowering SNAm and a proportionally higher SSBE, albeit not as noticeably. However, the dataset of *n-fictional* games is smaller than that of *n-real* ones, so too far-reaching conclusions should be avoided, especially regarding individual accent instances.

The main conclusion regarding the accents and archetypes as contrasted to narrative setting, then, is that nearly every instance of accents other than SNAm and SSBE appear in *real* narratives and them only. In *fictional* narratives, SNAm and SSBE form the vast majority of all accents – 87% as opposed to 66% in *real* narratives.

5. Discussion

In this chapter I discuss my findings in detail, following a similar format as with my results chapter: I begin with observations of broader linguistic perspective, then move on to the archetypes and finally the narrative setting(s). In the latter half of the chapter, I feature two case studies, one accent and one game, to demonstrate how some of the topics discussed so far relate to individual games and representations. My research questions (reiterated below) also follow the structure of my discussion chapter, with the first guiding the discussion in 5.1, the second in 5.2, etc. The fourth question is a continuous theme that will be periodically touched upon in all sections.

1. *What kinds of dialects and accents can we find in AAA videogames?*
2. *How are these elements divided among the pertinent narrative roles within the game?*
3. *Does the game's narrative setting affect the answer to the aforementioned questions?*
4. *What kinds of ideological trappings do the resulting linguistic divisions reveal?*

5.1 General Discussion

My initial research question was about the accents themselves – what accents of the English language can we find in video games? As became evident in the results chapter, the picture is overwhelmingly Standard North American, and to a lesser degree, SSBE. Roughly two thirds of all accents in my data are of North American origins (n=160 of 232) – and of these accents, nearly four fifths (n=126 of 159) are Standard North American.

When compared with Lippi-Green's quantitative account of accents in Disney movies (2012), the results show many commonalities. While her typology is slightly different, the two "main" accents, SNAm and SSBE, are of quite similar representations. In her data, "Standard American English" is spoken by 43% of characters (54% in my data) and "Standard British" by 22% (18% in my data). Also, non-native English accents correspond well, with 9% representation in both her and my data. All in all, the general picture is remarkably similar, corroborating Lippi-Green's results about the prevalence of SNAm and SSBE in media representations (2012: 115), the former especially having to do with the "globalisation of world media based on American models" (Bayard et al. 2001: 44).

We can thus conclude, with quite compelling evidence, that SNAm truly is *the* accent of mainstream AAA video games, and it most often forms the "implicit frame of reference"

(Blommaert & Verschueren 1998: 357) against which all other accents are set. The result is an overwhelming support for both the presence and effects of standard language ideology. And if media products' representations can have effects through repeated exposure (Lippi-Green 2012: 103), then this exposure is certainly here, especially with regard to SNAm. In light of previous research on media representations, this is not a surprising finding, but it bears mention, nonetheless.

These broad, repeating patterns are, ultimately, of prime importance. Regarding the implicit manifestations of language ideology, Blommaert and Verschueren (1998: 357) argue that “isolated examples are never sufficient as evidence: coherence—manifested either as recurrence or as systematic absence—is necessary to warrant conclusions.” When it comes to the prevalence of SNAm and the dearth of most other, less represented accents, one can definitely witness a recurrence and a systematic absence, respectively. This is worth bearing in mind later on as well, when we discuss some of the other manifestations of standard language ideology.

The general picture that characterizes linguistic representations in games, then, is that of “attitude hegemony,” or “Pax Americana” (Bayard et al. 2001), by which the massive (over)representation of standard North American accents has come to characterize the entire media landscape, games included, and concomitantly, it has become the media's “regional” standard. In other words, my results, consistent with Lippi-Green (2012), Ensslin (2010; 2012) and Bleichenbacher (2008), show that in games, standard language ideology thrives, and that the “matrix of normalcy” (Goorimoorthee 2019: 280) constructed upon said ideological positions is distinctly (mainstream) American. SSBE is still surprisingly prevalent – its position likely derives from its historical prestige and role in specific types of representations (e.g. “villain,” see next section on archetypes). The notions presented here form a larger, contextual generalization, of course, and the situation is certainly more complex: many factors can affect the prevalence of accents – nonetheless, never to the real detriment of SNAm.

One likely reason for this adherence to standard language ideology might be that large game studios and publishers are in the business first and foremost to make profit. Therefore, reliance on normative representations of language, following the globally increased social attractiveness of SNAm among native speakers (Ensslin 2010: 217), is to be expected. This might lead publishers into making “safe” choices as far as standard, tried-and-true representations are concerned (e.g. the SNAm speaking hero), while possibly making moves towards diversity with smaller concessions, such as including minority accents in supporting roles (see next section). And indeed, my sampling method of the most popular games means that my results capture the linchpin of commercialism from mainstream publishers. These practices certainly qualify as “promotion [of a standard variety]

in a wide range of functions” that implicitly devalues other forms (Milroy 2001: 547), further legitimizing the position of SNAm as the language of video games.

5.2 Archetypes: The Relationship Between Narrative Function and Accent

We have seen, then, the prevalence SNAm and SSBE, and that their predominance seems to outweigh much of otherwise relevant factors, such as archetype and narrative setting. What about the archetypes themselves and the accents besides the “two big ones”? In the early days of linguistic research into video games, Ensslin (2010: 217) argued, in a two-part argument, that “non-standard varieties are used rarely and if they are, they tend to be functionalized for character portrayal throughout.” The first part of Ensslin’s conclusion is firmly corroborated by my results. The second part, however, demands closer inspection, which I take up in this and the sections to follow. I initially hypothesized, mostly following Lippi-Green (2012), that **1)** SNAm would be strongly associated with “hero” characters, and that **2)** prestigious varieties besides SNAm accents would be used more for secondary characters, such as “villains” **3)** and LowRep accents would be used for other lesser or supporting roles, such as “helpers.”

5.2.1 SNAm and the Hero

The **first** hypothesis was met rather clearly, but the difference *vis-à-vis* other archetypes only becomes clear when contrasted against a *fictional* narrative setting, where especially heroes show proclivity for SNAm (73% of *fictional* heroes feature SNAm). Goorimoorthee et al. (2019: 270) argue that “Pax Americana [...] is embedded in and iconized by the voices of heroic characters.” While my observations certainly support this position, the strong representation of SNAm in the “hero” category did not happen at the expense of representation in other archetype groups. In other words, the accent’s “representational clout” reaches far beyond simply the “heroic” characters. Indeed, the pervasiveness of SNAm seems to indicate that the unspoken precepts drawn from standard language ideology can potentially trump the need for characterization via other accents (e.g. using minority accents for villains). Truly, SNAm can simply be utilized most anywhere.

The heroes did feature a noticeable lack of SSBE accents, however, whereas SSBE was present in other archetype categories in nearly equal measure. The issue of group identity and identification can be at play here: the “hero” archetypally stands in for player, who needs to have a relatable, “iconic” (Irvine & Gal 2000) accent. Indeed, who we most readily identify with depends on cultural

factors (Edwards 2009: 91), and SSBE is certainly not an accent that most Americans (let alone even people in the UK) can identify with, thus it does not get assigned to the hero unless necessitated by the game's linguistic matrix. When it comes to the "hero," then, SSBE falls into the same group with all other LowRep accents, and SNAm prevails. And, since the sociocultural and linguistic context of mainstream video games is distinctly North American, not to mention a significant share of the market, then both audience expectations and developer predilections revolving around SNAm-speaking heroes might be, in a sense, quite logical. The end result is that, of all the accents in my data, SNAm is the only distinctly "non-othering" accent, and ultimately, the one choice that results in a domesticated approach for an US audience – or rather, ever since "Pax Americana" (Bayard et al. 2001), for virtually all other audiences as well. From this perspective, the lack among heroes of the otherwise prevalent SSBE, as well as of LowRep accents, are largely explained.

5.2.2 SSBE and the Villain

The **second** hypothesis was met partially. With the other prestigious variety in my data being, of course, SSBE, the "villains" did feature SSBE more than LowRep accents, but it was prevalent among "helpers" and "dispatchers" as well – in fact, all three categories had a surprisingly similar distribution of SSBE (between 19–21%). SSBE has traditionally been associated with villains (Lippi-Green 2012; Bleichenbacher 2012), echoing the classic attitudinal notion which postulates that "British RP represents prestige without solidarity or benevolence" (Stewart et al. 1985: 103). But it seems that, on a general level, the accent receives wider use that belies this stereotype, although SSBE among villains became visibly more pronounced in *n-fictional* games (see section 5.3.2).

Characterization-wise, the "villains" and "dispatchers" might be explained by the power and status associated with SSBE speakers, but the "helpers," scarcely. The fairly equal representation of SSBE among all non-hero archetypes can most likely be attributed to its othering qualities, combined with its position as the accent of history and fantasy in audiovisual narratives. These types of games were present in my data too, and they often facilitate SSBE-based linguistic matrices. Also, since narrative setting can affect what accents can be featured, and 17 of 25 of my games were *n-real*, this might have constrained the use of SSBE in many roles, especially as a stereotypical villain, since British characters might be simply out of place in US-based settings (which many *n-real* games have), regardless of the accent's otherwise suitable characterization qualities.

Language attitude studies have noted the waning prestige of SSBE as well as its concomitant supersession by SNAm (Ensslin 2010: 211). Twenty years later, and my data would certainly corroborate this, both on a general level, and also regarding SSBE's wider-than-expected distribution among the archetypes. Indeed, the relative prevalence of SSBE and its fairly even distribution outside the "hero" category seem to position it as a "standard othering accent." In this sense, then, SSBE is in a group of its own: it is not a "major" accent on par with SNAm (except in games with an SSBE linguistic matrix), but it is not among LowRep accents either. Its position likely derives from both its legacy as a prestigious standard accent, as well as its entrenchment as the accent of history and/or fantasy in media representations.

5.2.3 Minor Accents and the Helper

The **third** hypothesis was met quite clearly: the "helper" had the lowest relative representation of SNAm and, more importantly, the majority of accents (16 of all 19 accents) were present in the "helper" category, including 13 of 16 LowRep accents. This clearly shows that, in general, when a "minor" accent is present, it is most likely to be a "helper." These observations, however, apply only in *n-real* games, as minor accents all but disappear in *fictional* games (see 5.3.1 below). Goorimoorthee et al. present an argument pertinent to our discussion about helpers:

"In recent years, some narrative game developers have shown a tendency toward trying to paint a more diversified picture of the fictional societies they represent and how this is reflected by character accents. However, this diversification tends to follow fairly predictable, ideologized patterns, and it reconfirms a lot of the findings of accent attitudinal research." (2019: 272)

Archetypally speaking, the "helper" is the category where this diversity and linguistic variety mostly manifest, as inclusion of LowRep-accented characters. It is possible, then, that this prevalence of LowRep accents among helpers might not be so much about the category's "rejection" of SNAm, but rather about perceived demands of increased diversity, resulting in an abundance of LowRep accents on "helper" characters, and to a lesser extent, "villains." In my data, this notion and the diversification along "fairly predictable, ideologized patterns" (ibid.) is clearly instantiated in military-themed first-person shooter games: in *Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare*, the American hero and his primary helper speak SNAm; other, more minor helpers feature SSBE, Irish, Estuary English and even an Arabic accent, while the main villains feature SSBE and Arabic accents. Machin and van Leeuwen (2007: 74) note the close connection between the US military and the representations thereof in entertainment, and as the best-selling game series (*Call of Duty*)

of its genre, it is not unlikely that these choices of representation are premeditated, even propagandistic. Be that as it may, the highlighted point is that even linguistic representations can certainly be influenced by ideologized patterns that reach beyond naïve or unconscious adherence to established convention.

The second part of Ensslin's argument, quoted earlier in section 5.2, was that "non-standard varieties [...] tend to be functionalized for character portrayal throughout" (2010: 217). This, too, seems true for the most part. However, there were instances in my data where there truly did not seem to be a clear characterizing function between accent and character. Examples include Dr. Amari in *Fallout 4*, a doctor with an Indian accent in post-apocalyptic Boston, MA; Usef Omar in *Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare*, an Estuary English -speaking sergeant in the player's military squad; or Jeffrey Davis, a courageous African American police officer aiding Spider-Man in his fight against the villains of New York City (*Marvel's Spider-Man*). Many of these helper characters cannot in good faith said to be used for simple indexing or characterization purposes.

It is still noteworthy that, regardless of characterization or lack thereof, these LowRep-accented characters are overwhelmingly in the "helper" category (n=15 of 28 of all LowRep accents), and to a lesser degree, the "villain" (n=9 of 28 of all LowRep accents). So, while the representations might not be explicitly or even intentionally utilized for any negative characterization, these sparkles of diversity systematically miss the "hero" category, and the minority-accent speakers remain as supporting characters for the (virtually always) SNAm-speaking hero, whose minority accent requires a corresponding linguistic matrix or heavy narrative justification. Or, to turn the argument around, a non-standard accented hero in a standard North American linguistic matrix is extremely rare. In my data, only 1 of 32 heroes fill this criterion: Ronald "Red" Daniels in *Call of Duty: WWII*, a soldier from Texas in World War II, features a light Southern US accent, possible drawing on the low-in-status but high-in-solidarity stereotype (Preston 1999) befitting his hearty character.

5.2.4 Summary of Characters and Archetypes

In summary, the relationship between archetype and accent can be seen, not as a preordained connection between certain accents and archetypes, but rather in terms of a *constraint*: a "hero" does not *have* to feature a SNAm accent, but certain accents are "not befitting" a hero (but narrative setting can affect this, see 5.3 below). On the other hand, though, is the observation that SNAm can simply be utilized anywhere, in conjunction with any archetype and within almost any narrative setting. These observations quite clearly underline the effects of standard language ideology in

games – and indeed, ideology is the most powerful when operating in these invisible, taken-for-granted ways (Lippi-Green 2012: 79). Archetype-accent combinations, then, act as kind of blueprints, set against a “matrix of normalcy” (Goorimoorthee et al. 2019: 280), in the form of realizable potential for linguistic representations: some are allowed and suitable, others are unsuitable and typically avoided.

Of all the archetype categories, the “hero,” in a sense, stands in a category of its own, whereas the other categories, “helper,” “villain” and “dispatcher,” generally show much more commonalities than differences. Coming back to Goorimoorthee et al.’s (2019: 270) notion of Pax Americana being embedded in and iconized in the voices of heroes: I certainly agree with this assessment, but I might rephrase it thus: “Pax Americana is embedded in the voices of any and potentially all characters, but its singular status as ‘the hero’s voice’ stems primarily from the exclusion of other, representationally minor accents.” In closing, my treatise on archetypes agrees with much of the previous research I have discussed in the preceding chapters, but one important factor still warrants examination: that of narrative setting. I discuss this next.

5.3 Narrative Setting Discussion

I now move on to discuss the narrative setting(s) of the games, and specifically, how these relate to the archetypes and distribution of accents examined in previous sections. My fourth hypothesis was that my other suppositions (SNAm for heroes, minor accents for others, etc.) would hold true stronger in *n-fictional* games, since in a fictional setting the narrative might set fewer constraints on possible accents by having less stringent demands for authenticity or realism.

5.3.1 Real Narratives

As we saw in the results chapter, the games’ narrative context had a profound impact on the prevalence of certain accents (or lack thereof). The main observation was that nearly all LowRep and/or minority accents were featured only in *real* narratives. Indeed, both L1 and L2 accents were featured among them, and it is difficult to think of one single factor that unites all these accents besides their relative rarity of representation – except the basis of their narrative “justification.”

Based on my results, I argue that the choice to use a “non-standard” accent in *n-real* games is being shaped by at least two major factors: in the *first*, a realistic, historical (or quasi-historical) setting of a narrative calls for a corresponding accent. Examples include Southern US English in 1890’s US

South and Midwest (*Red Dead Redemption 2*), African American Vernacular English in a fictional rendition of Los Angeles (*Grand Theft Auto V*) or a set of varieties from the British Isles (Scottish, Irish and Estuary English) in World War I (*Battlefield 1*).

The *second* option is where an accent is clearly used for characterization, and naturally, *n-real* games feature these as well. An example of this would be *Assassin's Creed Origins*, set in ancient Egypt around 30 BCE: most characters feature African or Arabic accents, whereas queen Cleopatra has an SSBE accent. Narrative-wise, no real explanation for this anomaly presents itself (an Egyptian queen, living a millennium before there was even a semblance of the English language to speak of). Therefore, it is likely that the accent was chosen to emphasize her regal persona through corresponding qualities associated with the SSBE accent (e.g. Stewart et al. 1985).

Both of these two factors can apply simultaneously, but the second cannot override the first. In other words, Cleopatra can speak SSBE because it fits the “historical accent” -trope, but she could not have a SNAm accent, since the historical narrative setting would not permit it. On the other hand, having a local accent (African or Arabic) would not be appropriate for her either because of the prestige the character requires.

Nonetheless, from these factors emerges a pivotal observation: accents beyond the established standards (SNAm and/or SSBE) need a *raison d'être*, some sort of narrative or contextual justification for being featured, regardless of the archetype or the character's role in the story. Most often this reason seems to be that the narrative features a character whose backstory places them in a particular national context (Russian, Irish, French, etc.). This means that the primary and arguably only reason one might hear, say, an Australian accent in an *n-real* game is because the narrative includes Australian characters. Noteworthy, this rationale applies regardless of archetype – and, notably, these are the only contexts in *n-real* games where the “hero” too can have a non-standard accent.

Battlefield 1 offers a great example: its multiple narratives follow the efforts of soldiers of different nationalities in World War I, therefore engaging the “historical context” factor. Here, four out of five heroes have non-SNAmerican accents (Australian, Italian, Estuary English and an unclear Arabian/British mix). However, these narratives (termed “war stories”) are quite short/secondary compared to most other games in my data, and arguably they are not central to the otherwise multiplayer-focused game. This seems to indicate that LowRep heroes are more acceptable in these narratives of “lesser statute.” While a single instance does not make a pattern, *Battlefield 1* alone, however, accounts for three out of seven non-American accented heroes in *all* my data. If

Battlefield 1 (or other similar games) would have featured one, more central narrative, the choice of accent for the hero(es) might have well been different.

The choice of focusing on a variety of different characters does seem to be of conscious design, however, indicating an awareness of linguistic diversity that seems possible to fulfill only in *real* narratives. Having a narrative justification for including a speaker of a particular accent does not, of course, erase the connection between speaker, dialect and social identity, but it does mean, at least, that there were other considerations beyond just accessing a particular stereotype. This is arguably even more important among *n-real* games, since higher perceived realism of (and engagement with) the representation's context may facilitate attitudinal and behavioral changes (Busselle & Bilandzic 2008; Hall & Zwarun 2012). In other words, a Scottish accent on a Scottish person in a *real* context vs. on a Tolkienesque Dwarf in a *fictional* fantasy context can be perceived quite differently.

With that being said, however, the primacy of SNAm in *real* narratives still holds true: in most *n-real* games, historical ones included, the linguistic matrix usually tends to be Standard North American, and regional/minority accents are present in accordingly low numbers. And, once again, if the prevailing matrix is that of SNAm, the hero virtually always has a standard accent. This juxtaposition demonstrates the connection between narrative setting and the inclination towards standard language ideology: SNAm is the preferred accent in all types of narratives, but certain contexts can attenuate its use to varying degrees, whereas LowRep accents are used mostly for flavor, if at all. To put it simply, one cannot speak North American English in Egypt, but locales such as Chicago (*Watch Dogs*), Boston (*Fallout 4*) or New York City (*Tom Clancy's The Division* and *Marvel's Spider-Man*) do *not* need local, regional or non-standard accents to be "believable."

5.3.2 Fictional Narratives

We have previously established the significant presence of SNAm, and to a lesser extent, SSBE in both *real* and *fictional* narratives: in the latter, the prevalence of these accents became ever more significant, and the incidence of LowRep accents diminished correspondingly. The previously made argument that LowRep accents need a reason for their being means that, largely, they are *de facto* constrained in their appearance to *n-real* games. Indeed, these accents in *n-fictional* games were few and far between: only 5 of 70 (7%) characters, contrasted to *n-real* games, where total LowRep accent representation was 32%. What LowRep accents do we have in my data of *n-fictional* games, then? Two Scottish accents, both drawing on the aforementioned Dwarf trope (who conventionally speak with a Scottish accent in media representations), two AAE-speakers in space, both explained

by the choice of actor(s), and finally, a carefree and sexualized car mechanic with a conspicuously broad Southern US accent in a quirky retro-futuristic fantasy world that mixes automobiles and cell phones with traditional tropes of magic and swordplay – and has very little to do with the US south.

As *n-fictional* games very rarely have this real-life based connection to a regional or social context, their linguistic matrices tend to be built entirely upon SNAm, SSBE or a combination thereof, even more so than with *n-real* games. This is an important observation regarding the relationship between a game's realism, its linguistic matrix and standard language ideology: *n-fictional* games seem even more “comfortable” in their utilization of standard accents and them only. In other words, the varieties spoken in outer space or in mythical lands are invariably, yet to no great surprise, SNAm or SSBE.

Paradoxically, *fictional* narratives are technically more open in terms of characterization via accent stereotyping, yet they seem much more limited in their choice of dialects/varieties, under the hold of conventional, “canonized” accents. Therefore, it seems rather impossible to hear, say, an Australian accent in an *n-fictional* game – there simply does not exist a convention for it. And indeed, for the player repeatedly conditioned to prevailing norms that draw from standard language ideologies, such an accent might truly sound out of place in a *fictional* setting. Edwards (2009: 21) reminds us that people in general are accustomed to accents and dialects announcing its speaker's memberships in certain social or ethnic groups; one might extend this thought to characterizing, *fictional* representations and argue that if this convention of audience familiarity is not there, it is very rare to hear such accent in *n-fictional* narratives. Indeed, it is likely that in fictional games, characterization is more often achieved through stylistic means, likely within the confines of SNAm or some British variety.

If *fictional* games are arguably less constrained by demands of realism, however, why do we not see more “minor” accents and wild characterization (my fourth hypothesis)? The answer, I believe, lies in the nature of games' subject matter, *fictional* ones included. Of her data of Disney movies, Lippi-Green notes (2012: 111) that “[p]recisely because of animation's (assumed) innocence and innocuousness, the film makers have a broader spectrum of tools available to them and a great deal more leeway.” So, accordingly, the more cartoonish a game's narrative setting is, the more room there is for heavier and, arguably, more stereotypical characterization through accent. Cartoons, then, are “anti-real,” but even *n-fictional* games are often more akin to science fiction or fantasy movies, therefore requiring a higher degree of cohesion, or “narrative realism” (Busselle & Bilandzic 2008: 256) in the fictional macrocosms they represent. Games like these are, in a sense, more serious narratives, and indeed, all games in my data are aimed for adults. There exist, of

course, video games made specifically for children – examination of their representations might make for an illuminating study, but it is not this one.

I also need to remind, however, that due to spatial constraints this study looked at the primary characters of each game only. Doubtlessly more LowRep accents in *n-fictional* games exist, but they do so on very minor characters – this, of course, being a finding in and of itself. In addition, my data included no more than eight of these *n-fictional* games, so more focused research would be needed to assess specific qualities that can affect their linguistic representations. Suffice to say that my main observations about *n-fictional* games still stand.

At this point we can come back to Ensslin’s quote that I gave in section 5.2: “non-standard varieties are used rarely and if they are, they tend to be functionalized for character portrayal throughout” (2010: 217). When I discussed *n-real* “helpers” in section 5.2.3, I contested this assessment – with fictional games, I concede fully. To reiterate, through our discussion about *n-real* and *n-fictional* games, an observation emerged: many accents appear only in *real* narratives, whereas only certain, established/standard ones appear in *fictional* narratives. None of these factors significantly challenge the position of SNAm or SSBE and indeed, the prevalence of both these two accents grew noticeably when moving from *real* to *fictional* games.

5.4 Illustrative Examples

I now take up two exemplar cases that illustrate many of the points made so far. First, I discuss an accent, African American English, whose treatment in games reveals some of the features common to LowRep accents in my data. Afterwards, I take up a video game, *Assassin’s Creed Unity*, to discuss the game’s linguistic matrix and how it affects the representations within it, as well as some of the rationales given by the game’s producer for these linguistic choices. Both of these examples elucidate the relationships between linguistic representations and the games themselves, as well as the effects of standard language ideology thereon.

5.4.1 A Minority Accent: African American English

Among accents of lower representation, discussed at many junctures above, African American English has a somewhat notable presence (n=15), warranting a small discussion. With regard to archetypes, AAE is similar to other LowRep accents, being most prevalent in the “helper” category and to a lesser extent, the “villain,” however, there are instances of AAE in all archetype categories

except the “donor.” So, while I discuss AAE, most observations that relate to archetypes are applicable to other LowRep accents as well.

One of the key arguments from previous research was that, in media representations, minority accents are often being utilized for indexing roguish characters or for negative stereotyping (Ensslin 2010; Lippi-Green 2012). With regard to African Americans, Lippi-Green (2012: 123) notes that stereotypical representations thereof have been quite common in the media, and that, in her data of Disney films, “the most glaring missteps have to do with the representation of African Americans and people of color more generally” (ibid.: 119).

My results on this topic are mixed, as my data included a variety of different representations. Some AAE-speakers are portrayed negatively: in *Tom Clancy’s The Division*, an action-thriller set in modern-day New York City, Larae Barrett (a “villain” and a brutal leader of a street gang) speaks AAE – the only minority accent in an otherwise SNAmerican linguistic matrix. Other times AAE-speakers are portrayed positively: in *Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare*, Knox (a “helper” and a soldier in the player’s military squad) speaks AAE. These two are exemplary of LowRep accents’ archetypal division as well as patterns of use. Rather, then, my results indicate that AAE and other LowRep accents can be featured on both positively and negatively evaluated characters, but they are virtually always on more minor, supporting characters. In other words, LowRep accents are associated with, or they “iconize” (Irvine & Gal 2000), these secondary archetype groups through their systematic assignment thereon.

The use of AAE in both positive and negative roles, however, seems to be in contrast with Lippi-Green’s (2012) findings of minority-accented characters virtually always being portrayed negatively or simplistically, which, in this sense, it is certainly a step up from Disney’s traditional, often blatant stereotyping. However, as previously discussed, the games in my data are closer to movies than cartoons, both culturally and semiotically, which is likely to attenuate the more stereotypical representations. Bloomquist (2015: 740) notes this contradiction as well by stating that “in some respects, animated films have not evolved in the same way traditional films have in providing a more well-rounded view of social and cultural life in a global society.” It is therefore noteworthy – yet not really surprising – that strides towards realism in representations can, at least to some extent, be an answer to stereotypic portrayals of AAE and minority accents in general.

As previously discussed in conjunction with LowRep accents, their wide variety (including AAE) seems to indicate that, on a general level, no single one seems to be used over another for characterizing or indexing purposes. This seemingly egalitarian practice masks, of course, the

overwhelming presence of SNAm and SSBE, as well as the linguistic matrices built upon standard language ideological positions that do not feature non-standard accents. Downing and Husband (2005: 37, 55), however, have noted the relatively higher representation of African Americans in the media as compared to other minorities in the US. This was the case in my data too (n=15 as compared to low 3's with most other LowRep accents), which might be due to African American media presence or a connection with US-related narrative settings, as many *n-real* games in my data take place in the US. Indeed, as Queen (2015: 5) puts it: “[t]he people who produce the media rely on many of the same social, cultural, and political contexts to make sense of their experience as the audience does.” In other words, the relative cultural proximity of African American culture (not least via the media) might facilitate their inclusion – whether this is conscious or not.

Sometimes having AAE featured might simply be a corollary to having an African American actor (this being, of course, a decision in and of itself). Lippi-Green (2012: 124) summarizes the nature of African American English representations in her data: “[t]he language of the main African American characters is only slightly distinct from that of their Anglo counterparts, in part because the voice actors restrict themselves to intonation patterns. There are no AAVE grammatical constructions or idioms that would make that [sic] Anglo/African American differences more distinct.” This quote perfectly summarizes my results as well, as the AAE representations are very close to standard SNAm, most often revealing themselves in intonation patterns or other, subtler phonological markers, such as the lack of rhoticity or word-final “g-dropping.” Here, too, the issue might be the standardizing effects of language ideology that allows for modest difference in pronunciation but not much more, and it certainly speaks for Milroy and Milroy’s notion of “a standard language as an idea in the mind rather than a reality – a set of abstract norms to which actual usage may conform to a greater or lesser extent” (2012: 19).

AAE, and minority accents, then, seem to be usable mostly if they conform to these standardized norms, whereas grammatically marked forms appear only in special cases. Edwards (2009: 75) reminds us that “while pronunciation and vocabulary can be important perceptual triggers, it is the grammatical arguments that have always been the strongest underpinnings of assertions of dialect inferiority,” and this might show as a lack of representation among non-standard accents – AAE especially. So, although this study is focused on accents, it is worth mentioning as a side note that expectations of standard grammar can certainly have a role to play, both in the choice of non-standard accents and how far these accents are allowed to “veer” from this standard.

In my data, there is one exception. The only game to feature *explicitly vernacular* African American English (AAVE in my terminology) is *Grand Theft Auto V (GTA 5)*, set in “Los Santos,” Rockstar

North's rendition of modern-day Los Angeles, California. Here all characters featuring AAVE (n=3) are street hustlers and criminals – a long-standing stereotype of African Americans, tendentially framed in US media discourse (Downing & Husband 2005). In *GTA 5*, however, virtually all other characters are criminals of some sort as well, regardless of accent, and the main African American “hero,” (Franklin Clinton) is a voice of reason among his more impulsive compatriots. Therefore, AAVE accents are not directly typecast into criminal roles through “iconization” (Irvine & Gal 2000), or by contrasting (or “othering”) them with other, more virtuous characters (as in Lippi-Green's data on Disney, 2012). Archetypally, AAVE in *GTA 5* is not limited to a single category either (hero, helper and villain), and the representations are phonologically and phonetically accurate (albeit acted, of course), with all pertinent actors being native speakers of AAVE. Indeed, the utilization of AAVE in *GTA 5* is more likely related to narrative-setting as opposed to strict, archetypal casting. It is still noteworthy, however, that this narrative context where AAVE is present and arguably, “allowed,” is connected to representations of criminal activity and “life on the streets.”

AAE, then, might not always be specifically used for negative stereotyping, but it falls victim, like the other LowRep accents, to the same preconditions drawn from standard language ideology. As such, it is exemplar of a minority accent in my data: suitable for flavor or added diversity, but mostly as “helpers” and “villains” and, in addition, explicit deviations from the standard (as in AAVE) require a massive narrative justification, which, unfortunately, tends to draw on stereotypes. Therefore, with AAE and indeed most other minority accents, the effect might be that of “unintentional othering” (Goorimoorthee et al. 2019: 280) – not necessarily through their linguistic/social features, but rather by their systematic assignment to lesser, supporting roles.

In summary, my discussion about African American English has shown that it is, on the one hand, still being utilized stereotypically, but on the other, also more neutrally, albeit in supporting roles. In addition, its vernacular features are attenuated to fit standardized features of (written) representation. A hypothetical question perfectly illustrates the imbalance between some accents and archetypes, as well as crystallizes the subtle but powerful effects of standard language ideology in games. If a character speaks AAE (or with any representationally minor accent), this question reads, “why does he or she have an African American accent?” If the character speaks SNAmerican, no such questions ever arise.

5.4.2 A Linguistic Matrix: Assassin's Creed Unity

Linguistically, *Assassin's Creed Unity* is a curious case. It follows the clandestine conflict of two secret societies, the Assassins and the Templars, during the French Revolution, who are both trying to advance their own agenda(s) to shape the future of mankind. Despite its setting, however, nearly all characters speak with an SSBE or a stylized variation of a British accent. This is a prime example of a “replacement strategy” (Bleichenbacher 2012: 158), where English is used to replace a language that could not have been there in the first place – SSBE in 18th century France, in this instance. This strategy is common in films set in non-English speaking contexts (ibid.: 166), and the *Assassin's Creed* games, with their historical settings, are veritably their video game counterparts. So why, in this case, was SSBE chosen over a French accent?

Technically speaking, the main narratives of all *Assassin's Creed* games take place in an “Animus,” a computer simulation of sorts, while the external, secondary narrative takes place in modern times. Therefore, it could be argued that “realistic” representations of accents might not be appropriate or suitable since the experience is recreated inside a simulation. Indeed, *Unity*'s Creative Director Alex Amancio echoes this sentiment: “The idea is that the Animus is translating everything into the language you're playing in” (Lewis 2014). This does not, however, offer any explanation as to what accents *are* present, and Amancio justifies the choice of British accents for the characters in *Unity* thus:

“the development team took a tip from Hollywood. British accents, they determined, just have more of a period feel than an American accent would. It gives the distinct feeling of being set in the past in a foreign place.” (Lewis 2014)

It is noteworthy that here the implied “choice” of accents was between American (i.e. SNA_m) and SSBE – exactly the two most prevalent accents in my data, well in line with both standard language ideology and the conventions of use in historical narrative settings. Later in the interview, Amancio issues a rather contradictory statement:

“The only lines that are going to be translated into English are gameplay-related elements that we need to convey to the player [...] Those parts will be in English. Everything else is in French [language, not accent]. You'll really have the immersion of walking around in Paris and hearing everyone speaking French.” (Lewis 2014)

In other words, characters related to the gameplay (read: the ones that have any relevance) all speak SSBE, and this “immersion” by hearing French takes place mostly by hearing street vendors exclaim “mon Dieu!” as the player rushes by them. SSBE is therefore framed as the superior accent

via “implicit metapragmatics” (Woolard 1998: 9), by signaling through implicit language-in-use that SSBE is more appropriate for the important characters. Here, it is noteworthy that Amancio does highlight the desirability of immersion by hearing French, indicating that such immersion is a desirable outcome, yet it is restricted in its application only to minor characters, resulting in a rather paradoxical “othering” (Goorimoorthee et al. 2019: 280) of French accented speakers in France. With regard to my selection of main characters, then, no French (accented) speakers exist. Or to put it in another way, through a Propopian lens, no character with an actual narrative function has a French accent. Indeed, *Unity* shows quite little archetypal variation, as most primary characters regardless of archetype (7 of 10) speak in SSBE or incorporate British features.

Lippi-Green notes (while discussing French as well, coincidentally) that logically, in movies set in France all characters should have French accents, but they do not, and who gets a French accent is dependent on dominant stereotypes (2012: 109). In *Assassin’s Creed Unity*, however, the choice of an SSBE accent seems to be first and foremost dictated *not* by characterization or archetypes but via its linguistic matrix built on the trope that a historical setting seems to call for an SSBE accent. This is a good example of the overriding force of a linguistic matrix and how it is central for setting the (linguistic) framework that the characters act and speak in. At this point it is fruitful to compare *Unity* to another, latter installment of the series in my data, *Assassin’s Creed Origins*, set in ancient Egypt. Here, most characters (of purportedly African descent) do speak with an African accent. The previous argument of computer simulation still stands. This is in stark contrast to *Unity*, and the question reads: why a British accent in France but an African accent in Africa?

A likely answer lies in the context of the narrative setting, as well as in language attitudes. Lippi-Green (2012: 108) notes that audiences might have an easier time in suspending disbelief about a linguistic representation if that representation is unknown to the audience. Nonetheless, perhaps the relatively closer cultural proximity of France vs. Egypt (to a Western audience) made it easier to go for the established standard: 18th century France might be a more prototypical “historical setting,” allowing for an SSBE linguistic matrix, whereas in Egypt it would have sounded out of place, disrupting “narrative engagement” (Busselle & Bilanzic 2009: 326). This does speak for the notion that, when possible, developers tend to go for the standard because it is, in a sense, “safer.”

However, the choice could also in part be about negative attitudes towards French accents that go back a long time. In a classic matched guise test, Lambert et al. (1960) found that, among French- and English-speaking students, not only was the English accent evaluated more positively, but French students evaluated their own accent as *worse* than the English students did, in what Lambert et al. called a “minority group reaction” (ibid.: 50–51). This points at the conclusion that, not only

are French accents clearly less prestigious than British ones, but that the same outlook is being shared by society at large, including the speakers of the accent itself. Therefore, building an entire linguistic matrix on French accents might have been risky, and indeed, through cause or effect, the accent does not have an established convention of use (in serious contexts) in English-based media, which might have been an affecting factor as well.

In the interview about *Unity*, Amancio said that they wanted to give the game a “period feel” (Lewis 2014), and perhaps this is exactly the answer: in a US cultural context, British accents are familiar enough not to, as he put it, “detract from the experience,” yet foreign enough for the predominantly North American audience to constitute a comfortable option for when “the feeling of being set in the past in a foreign place” (ibid.) is required. However, the road does lead back to language attitudes: SSBE is clearly more prestigious than its potential French counterpart and it is very likely that the choice of accents was guided by aims based on standard language ideology – as we have discussed, French (LowRep) accents might be suitable for helpers and villains, for example, but a historical game with a corresponding linguistic matrix would have meant that most if not all characters would have needed to speak with French accents. As Amancio puts it: “[...] the story is a little bit more serious, and having everyone speak in a thick French accent would detract a lot from the experience” (Lewis 2014). The subtle point to pick out here is that Amancio’s association with the French accent is the stereotypical “jolly chef” or “talking chandelier” -type of representation, drawn straight out of – ironically, given our previous discussion – a Disney cartoon.

In the end, perhaps the choice of design regarding this particular linguistic matrix was seesawing between familiarity and foreignism; between “domestication” and “foreignization” (Munday 2016: 225–226). The linguistic matrices of *Unity* and *Origins* are, of course, single instances, possibly made on the decision of a single producer. They are, however, indicative of the unspoken convention(s) that developers can fall back to when justifying their choices: that of standard language ideology. Ultimately, all the issues I have brought up here are from a particular context with a multitude of potentially affecting factors. And, as has been demonstrated, they should not be generalized too far – as we remember, it is the broad, repeating patterns that matter. Rather, the points I have brought up here are exemplary of the strategies used to incorporate, justify and rationalize choices having to do with representations of language and attitudes thereof.

Where does our discussion leave us, then? To draw the strands together, based on my results I argue that linguistic representations in games are a compromise and amalgamation of characterization, narrative consistency and stereotypical convention – all operating within the framework of standard language ideology that is characteristic to North American entertainment media.

6. Conclusion

In this study, I have examined the manifestations of language ideologies in contemporary AAA video games. My methodological approach was primarily quantitative, focusing on linguistic representations and how they were assigned among the archetypes that fulfill certain structural roles in the games' narratives. I also considered these narratives' connection(s) to the real world to capture some of the variation that can stem from either demands of narrative coherence and/or established convention. A picture emerged that was overwhelmingly North American in both its sound and standards of language use, largely corroborating the findings of Lippi-Green (2012), Bleichenbacher (2008), Ensslin (2010) and Goorimoorthee et al. (2019). My results, however, shed light on two different factors or analytical perspectives – character archetypes and narrative settings – that both constrained or facilitated the presence of certain kind(s) of linguistic representations.

As for the accents themselves, the dominance of Standard North American English became clear, and this dominance was hardly affected by any otherwise significant variables, pointing at the ubiquitous presence and powerful effects of standard language ideology. The conventions of use stemming from this ideology set constraints on accents of lower representation, which is reflected in exactly who is allowed to speak what: heroes and dispatchers were most strongly associated with SNAm, and what diversity was there to be found was found on the villains and helpers. SSBE was noticeably prevalent among the three last mentioned archetypes, but not on the hero: its use eclipsed the stereotype of villainy, and SSBE's function could be said to be that of a “standard other” accent.

Examination of the games' narrative settings revealed an interesting dichotomy: accents of lower representation (the LowRep accents) were almost exclusively featured in narratives that were based on real-life settings, and since fictional games lack this justification, they tend to draw even stronger from established convention and standard(ized) varieties, with the end result being that of reduced linguistic diversity. This, too, speaks of standard language ideology, shown in the unspoken primacy of the “standard”: its utilization requires no justification in almost any context, whereas accents beyond these standard varieties virtually always need a reason for their being.

The paramount observation here stands thus: although the video game is a relatively new medium, its ideological trappings are well entrenched in the tried-and-true linguistic conventions of North American audiovisual entertainment media, that have regularly been transferred into games wholesale. So, while games have their own unique characteristics, their representations are still, for the most part, firmly planted in familiar tropes, stereotypes and practices that are both borne out of and reinforce prevailing ideological positions. Over a decade ago, Ensslin (2010: 217–218) noted

the potential of games in breaking established (linguistic) stereotypes: the overall picture shows that this most certainly has not happened, at least among AAA games – whether or not smaller, independent (“indie”) games fare any different is a good question, and one that should be looked into as well. Nonetheless, it became clear that there can be a multitude of explaining and affecting factors prescribing language use in video game representations, and only a small amount of them could I examine within the scope of this study.

My point, however, was to look at the grand scheme of language in mainstream game narratives, and there I managed quite well. Contrasting archetypes with accents and narrative settings proved effective, and I was able to capture variation both at a general and individual level of the narrative. The archetype is clearly meaningful in modern games, and it is certainly connected with the choices of character representation. It is possible that the archetype reaches a level that is unconscious in design: the fact that the choice of characters and their roles comes first, and the assigned representations of language second, is common sense, of course, but the archetype demonstrates this at a deeper level than its simplicity might lead to believe.

With an extensive quantitative dataset, consisting of 232 characters across 25 cutting edge games, I am confident that, among a cohort of contemporary AAA video games, the results can be generalized well. Simultaneously, I created a corpus of linguistic representations present in the metadiscourse of modern videogame narratives. While my approach was broad due to its quantitative nature, the results could nonetheless be utilized as a base for a wide variety of hypotheses, or inspiration, for further studies.

My methodology had shortcomings too. It became clear that Propp’s archetypology does not always capture the full nuance of the characters’ functions in modern game narratives. Especially in cases of more non-linear games, certain characters might fulfill multiple functions or shift between them, so the archetype is certainly not a catch-all tool for a methodological framework. Also, in traditional fairy tales, the archetypes seem to have a fairly fixed “importance” with regard to their narrative functions, e.g. “helpers” are often minor characters, whereas in modern video games, this is not always the case. While the “hero” is fairly universally the most central character in the narrative, others might vary to an extent: for instance, there can be a “helper” character whose role and “functional” importance eclipses those of all other characters, and this relativity of importance the archetype does not account for.

In these situations, the need arises to look at different factors, in combination perhaps, for explanations about the assignment of linguistic representations. For example, Goorimoorthee et al.’s

(2019) by now finalized project “Speech Accents in Games,” that looked at social and cultural representations combined with the linguistic, will undoubtedly reveal some of these factors, and my results likely complement their findings well. Other discourse- or conversation analytical methods could prove useful as well, for example the analysis of frequency and turn-taking in dialogues, as Bleichenbacher (2008; 2012) did with a dataset of films.

Due to the large number of games in my data, I had to limit the number of characters I could examine per game, and my focus was therefore, partly by necessity, on the “main cast” of the games. In most games, especially linear narratives, this was not a problem, but with some larger, open-world games, many more characters could have well been examined (games like *Red Dead Redemption 2* and *The Witcher 3* feature at least a few hundred fully voiced characters). Focusing on the main characters was a worthwhile pursuit in and of itself, however, as the main cast doubtlessly receives the most attention and forethought with regard to their representations of language.

These methodological issues could be alleviated by focused approaches, perhaps concentrating on individual types or genres of games. Based on my results, I would hypothesize, however, that genre defined as “subject matter” (modern/historical, military setting, sci-fi, etc.) is far more meaningful than genre as defined as elements of gameplay (action-adventure, horror, strategy, etc.). Also, different types of games might have quite different demographics playing them, and examining the relationship between target audiences, their expectations and how language is represented in games might be fruitful as well.

The need for sociolinguistic research in the larger realm of video games is likely to grow ever larger in the coming years and decades; studies like this one are crucial for advancing the field and uncovering avenues for future inquiry. Attitudes, ideologies and stereotypes are all pieces in the puzzle of representation: their study can aid in uncovering patterns of use, and more importantly, in making explicit and questioning entrenched ideological positions, thus moving forward the video game as a story-telling medium of extraordinary capacity. To put it simply, the result could be better and more diverse video game narratives that treat linguistic variety as the norm, not the exception. The mother tongue of the Britons, it seems likely, will be the language of video game characters for the unforeseeable future, but French characters in France should not have to resort to borrowing their accent too.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Full list of games & character/archetype/accent -combinations

Year	Game, Setting & Realism	Character	Gender	Archetype	Accent	Notes
2018	Red Dead Redemption 2					
		Arthur Morgan	M	Hero	Southern US	
	<i>Various locales in America; 1899</i>	Dutch van der Linde	M	Dispatcher	StyINAm	Stylized Southern
	<i>real</i>	Micah Bell	M	Villain	StyINAm	Stylized Southern
		John Marston	M	Helper	StyINAm	Stylized Midwestern
		Charles Smith	M	Helper	SNAm	
		Bill Williamson	M	Helper	StyINAm	Stylized Southern
		Hosea Matthews	M	Helper	SNAm	
		Lenny Summers	M	Helper	AAE	
		Andrew Milton	M	Villain	SNAm	
		Sadie Adler	F	Helper	Southern US	
	Marvel's Spider-Man					
		Peter Parker	M	Hero	SNAm	
	<i>New York City, US</i>	Yuri Watanabe	F	Dispatcher	SNAm	
	<i>real</i>	Wilson Fisk	M	Villain	SNAm	
		Otto Octavius	M	Villain	SNAm	
		Martin Li	M	Villain	SNAm	
		Aunt May	F	Helper	SNAm	
		Mary Jane Watson	F	Helper	SNAm	
		Norman Osborn	M	Villain	SNAm	
		Jefferson Davis	M	Helper	AAE	
		Miles Morales	M	Helper	SNAm	
	God of War					
		Kratos	M	Hero	StyINAm	British features
	<i>Midgard (Norse)</i>	Atreus	M	Helper	SNAm	
	<i>fictional</i>	Baldur	M	Villain	StyINAm	British features
		Brok	M	Donor	StyINAm	Stylized Southern
		Freya	F	Helper	SNAm	
		Sindri	M	Donor	SNAm	
		Magni	M	Villain	SSBE	
		Modi	M	Villain	SSBE	
		Mimir	M	Helper	Scottish	
	Monster Hunter: World					
		[Player Character]	M or F	Hero	[No speech]	
	<i>"The New World"</i>	Handler	F	Dispatcher	SNAm	
	<i>fictional</i>	Field Team Leader	M	Dispatcher	SNAm	
		Commander	M	Dispatcher	SNAm	

		Seeker	M	Helper	[Unclear]	Mix of US and Brit phonology
		Third Fleet Master	F	Dispatcher	SSBE	
		The Tracker	F	Helper	SNAm	
		Admiral	M	Dispatcher	SNAm	
	Far Cry 5					
		The Deputy [PC]	M or F	Hero	[No speech]	
	<i>Montana, US</i>	Earl Whitehorse	M	Dispatcher	SNAm	
	<i>real</i>	Cameron Burke	M	Villain	SNAm	
		Joseph Seed	M	Villain	SNAm	
		John Seed	M	Villain	SNAm	
		Faith Seed	F	Villain	SNAm	
		Jacob Seed	M	Villain	SNAm	
		"Dutch" Roosevelt	M	Dispatcher	StylNAm	Glottal stops, Vernacular
		Jerome Jeffries	M	Dispatcher	SNAm	
		Eli Palmer	M	Dispatcher	SNAm	
2017	Call of Duty: WWII					
		Ronald "Red" Daniels	M	Hero	Southern US	
	<i>Europe; World War II</i>	Robert Zussman	M	Helper	SNAm	
	<i>real</i>	Drew Stiles	M	Helper	SNAm	Lisp
		Frank Aiello	M	Helper	SNAm	
		William Pierson	M	Dispatcher	SNAm	
		Joseph Turner	M	Dispatcher	SNAm	
		Augustine Pérez	M	Helper	Latin Am. Spanish	
		Arthur Crowley	M	Helper	SSBE	
		Rousseau	F	Helper	French	
		Arthur	M	Helper	AAE	
	Horizon Zero Dawn					
		Aloy	F	Hero	SNAm	
	<i>United States; 31st century</i>	Rost	M	Donor	SNAm	
	<i>real</i>	Teersa	F	Dispatcher	SNAm	
		Erend	M	Helper	SNAm	
		Varl	M	Helper	SNAm	
		Sona	F	Helper	SNAm	
		Sylens	M	Helper	AAE	
		Sun-King Avad	M	Helper	SNAm	
		Dervahl	M	Villain	SNAm	
		Helis	M	Villain	SNAm	
	Star Wars Battlefront II					
		Iden Versio	F	Hero	SNAm	
	<i>Space, futuristic</i>	Gideon Hask	M	Villain	SSBE	
	<i>fictional</i>	Del Meeko	M	Helper	SSBE	
		Garrick Versio	M	Dispatcher	SSBE	
		Luke Skywalker	M	Hero	SNAm	

		Shriv	M	Helper	SNAm	
		Lando Carlissian	M	Hero	AAE	
		Leia Organa	F	Hero	SNAm	
		Han Solo	M	Hero	SNAm	
		Kylo Ren	M	Villain	SNAm	
	Destiny 2					
		The Guardian [PC]	M or F	Hero	[No Speech]	
	<i>The Solar System</i>	Zavala	M	Dispatcher	AAE	
	<i>fictional</i>	Cayde-6	M	Dispatcher	SNAm	Robotic
		Ikora Rey	F	Dispatcher	SNAm	
		Ghost	M	Helper	SNAm	Robotic
		Dominus Ghaul	M	Villain	StylNAM	Deepened, Deliberate
		Hawthorne	F	Dispatcher	SNAm	
		The Consul	M	Villain	SSBE	
		The Speaker	M	Helper	SSBE	
		Sloane	F	Dispatcher	SNAm	
	Assassin's Creed Origins					
		Bayek	M	Hero	African	
	<i>Egypt; ~40 BC</i>	Hepzefa	M	Helper	African	
	<i>real</i>	Khemu	M	Dispatcher	African	
		Apollodorus	M	Helper	Arabic	
		Aya	F	Hero	African	
		Cleopatra	F	Dispatcher	SSBE	
		Kensa	F	Helper	African	
		Julius Caesar	M	Villain	SSBE	
		Flavius	M	Villain	SSBE	
		Septimius	M	Villain	SSBE	
2016	Uncharted 4					
		Nathan Drake	M	Hero	SNAm	
	<i>Europe, Latin America</i>	Samuel Drake	M	Dispatcher	SNAm	
	<i>real</i>	Rafe Adler	M	Villain	SNAm	
		Vargas	M	Helper	Latin Am. Spanish	
		Jameson	M	Helper	AAE	
		Elena Fisher	F	Helper	SNAm	
		Hector Alcázar	M	Villain	Latin Am. Spanish	
		Victor Sullivan	M	Helper	SNAm	
		Nadine Ross	F	Villain	South African	
		Evelyn	F	Donor	SSBE	
	Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare					
		Nick Reyes	M	Hero	SNAm	
	<i>Earth & Space; 2180</i>	Salen Kotch	M	Villain	SSBE	
	<i>real</i>	Admiral Raines	M	Dispatcher	SNAm	
		Nora Salter	F	Helper	SNAm	

		E3N "Ethan"	M	Helper	SNAm	Robotic
		Akeel Min Riah	M	Villain	Arabic	
		Usef Omar	M	Helper	Estuary English	
		Gator	M	Helper	Arabic	
		Captain Ferran	F	Helper	SSBE	
		Sean Brooks	M	Helper	Irish	
	Battlefield 1					
		Daniel Edwards	M	Hero	Estuary English	
	<i>World War I</i>	Townsend	M	Dispatcher	Scottish	
	<i>real</i>	McManus	M	Helper	Irish	
		Clyde Blackburn	M	Hero	SNAm	
		Wilson	M	Helper	SSBE	
		Luca Vincenzo Cocchiola	M	Hero	Italian	
		Frederick Bishop	M	Hero	Australian	
		Jack Foster	M	Helper	Australian	
		Zara Ghufuran	F	Hero	[Unclear]	British/Arabian
		T.E. Lawrence	M	Dispatcher	SSBE	
	Tom Clancy's The Division					
		[Player Character]	M or F	Hero	[No speech]	
	<i>New York City; 2015</i>	Faye Lau	F	Dispatcher	SNAm	
	<i>real</i>	Jessica Kandel	F	Dispatcher	SNAm	
		Paul Rhodes	M	Dispatcher	SNAm	
		Captain Benitez	M	Dispatcher	SNAm	
		Aaron Kenner	M	Villain	SNAm	
		Joe Ferro	M	Villain	SNAm	Vernacular
		Larae Barrett	F	Villain	AAE	
		Charles Bliss	M	Villain	SNAm	
	Final Fantasy XV					
		Noctis	M	Hero	SNAm	
	<i>The world of Eos</i>	Gladius	M	Helper	SNAm	
	<i>fictional</i>	Prompto	M	Helper	SNAm	
		Ignis	M	Helper	SSBE	
		Regis	M	Dispatcher	SSBE	
		Cindy	F	Helper	Southern US	
		Lunafreya	F	Helper	SSBE	
		Ardyn	M	Villain	SSBE	
		Ravus	M	Villain	SNAm	
		Aranea	F	Helper	SNAm	
2015	Call of Duty: Black Ops III					
		[Player Character]	M or F	Hero	SNAm	
	<i>Various locales, Earth; 2065</i>	Jacob Hendricks	M	Helper	SNAm	
	<i>real</i>	Rachel Kane	F	Helper	SNAm	
		John Taylor	M	Villain	SNAm	

		Sebastian Diaz	M	Villain	SNAm	
		Sarah Hall	F	Villain	SNAm	
		Peter Maretti	M	Villain	SNAm	
		Lieutenant Khalil	M	Helper	Arabic	
		Corvus	M	Villain	StyINAm	Robotic
		Goh Xiaulan	F	Villain	SE Asian	
	Fallout 4					
		[Player Character]	M or F	Hero	SNAm	
	<i>Boston, MA, US; 2287</i>	Shaun	M	Dispatcher	SNAm	
	<i>real</i>	Nate or Nora	M or F	Dispatcher	SNAm	
		Codsworth	M	Helper	SSBE	Robotic
		Piper Wright	F	Helper	SNAm	
		Ellie Perkins	F	Helper	SNAm	
		Nick Valentine	M	Helper	SNAm	
		Conrad Kellogg	M	Villain	SNAm	
		Dr. Amari	F	Helper	Indian	
		Brian Virgil	M	Donor	StyINAm	Mutated, [s] mixes with [j]
	Batman: Arkham Knight					
		Batman	M	Hero	SNAm	
	<i>Gotham City, "US"</i>	Scarecrow	M	Villain	SNAm	
	<i>fictional</i>	Jim Gordon	M	Helper	SNAm	
		Poison Ivy	F	Helper	SNAm	
		Arkham Knight	M	Villain	SNAm	
		Lucius Fox	M	Donor	SNAm	
		Alfred	M	Helper	SSBE	
		Oracle	F	Helper	SNAm	
		Robin	M	Helper	SNAm	
		Joker	M	Villain	SSBE	
	The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt					
		Geralt of Rivia	M	Hero	SNAm	
	<i>"The Continent"</i>	Yennefer	F	Helper	SSBE	
	<i>fictional</i>	Vesemir	M	Helper	SNAm	
		Emhyr var Emreis	M	Dispatcher	SSBE	
		Cirilla	F	Hero	SSBE	
		Keira Metz	F	Helper	SSBE	
		Triss Merigold	F	Helper	SNAm	
		Zoltan Chivay	M	Helper	Scottish	
		Avallac'h	M	Helper	SSBE	
		Eredin	M	Villain	SSBE	
	Metal Gear Solid 5: Phantom Pain					
		"Venom" Snake	M	Hero	SNAm	
	<i>Cyprus, Afghanistan, Africa; 1984</i>	Big Boss	M	Helper	SNAm	
	<i>real</i>	Quiet	F	Helper	[Non-English]	
		Tretij Rebenok	M	Villain	[No speech]	

		Revolver Ocelot	M	Dispatcher	SNAm	
		Benedict Miller	M	Dispatcher	SNAm	
		Skull Face	M	Villain	SNAm	
		Dr. Emmerich	M	Villain	SNAm	
		Eli, "Black Mamba"	M	Villain	Estuary English	
		Code Talker	M	Donor	[Unclear]	Native American-ish
2014	Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare					
		Jackson Mitchell	M	Hero	SNAm	
	<i>Various locales, Earth; 2060</i>	Will Irons	M	Dispatcher	SNAm	
	<i>real</i>	Cormack	M	Dispatcher	AAE	
		Gideon	M	Helper	SSBE	
		Jonathan Irons	M	Villain	SNAm	
		Joker	M	Helper	SNAm	
		Ilona	F	Helper	Russian	
		Ajani	M	Helper	African	
		Hades	M	Villain	Arabic	
		Knox	M	Helper	AAE	
	Grand Theft Auto V					
		Michael De Santa	M	Hero	SNAm	
	<i>Los Santos ("Los Angeles"), US</i>	Trevor Philips	M	Hero	SNAm	
	<i>real</i>	Dave Norton	M	Dispatcher	SNAm	
		Franklin Clinton	M	Hero	AAE	Vernacular
		Lamar Davis	M	Helper	AAE	Vernacular
		"Stretch" Joseph	M	Villain	AAE	Vernacular
		Lester Crest	M	Helper	SNAm	
		Steve Haines	M	Villain	SNAm	
		Devin Weston	M	Villain	SNAm	
		Wei Cheng	M	Villain	SE Asian	
	Destiny					
		[Player Character]	M or F	Hero	SNAm	
	<i>The Solar System</i>	Ghost	M	Helper	SNAm	
	<i>fictional</i>	The Speaker	M	Dispatcher	SSBE	
		Exo Stranger	F	Helper	SSBE	
		Uldren Sov	M	Donor	SNAm	
		Mara Sov	F	Donor	SNAm	
	Watch Dogs					
		Aiden Pearce	M	Hero	SNAm	
	Chicago, IL, US	Damien Brenks	M	Villain	SNAm	
	<i>real</i>	Maurice Vega	M	Villain	SNAm	
		Jordi Chin	M	Helper	SNAm	
		Dermot "Lucky" Quinn	M	Villain	SNAm	Old timer
		Clara Lille	F	Helper	French Canadian	

		Tobias Frewer	M	Donor	SNAm	
		Delford "Iraq" Wade	M	Villain	AAE	Vernacular
		Tyrone "Bedbug" Hayes	M	Helper	AAE	Vernacular
		Raymond "T-Bone" Kenney	M	Helper	StyINAm	Glottal stops, Vernacular
		Assassin's Creed Unity				
		Arno Dorian	M	Hero	SSBE	
	<i>Paris, Versailles; late 1700's</i>	François de la Serre	M	Dispatcher	SSBE	
	<i>real</i>	Mirabeau	M	Dispatcher	SSBE	
		Élise de la Serre	F	Helper	SSBE	
		Pierre Bellec	M	Villain	StyINAm	Irish-type rhoticity
		Marquis de Sade	M	Helper	SSBE	
		Aloys la Touche	M	Villain	[Unclear]	Rhotic, glottal stop, retroflex [ɫ]
		Le Roi des Thunes	M	Villain	SSBE	
		François-Thomas Germain	M	Villain	StyINAm	British features
		Napoleon Bonaparte	M	Helper	SSBE	