

Zombies, aliens, monsters, and slime: Making sense of the mess through a taxonomy of non-human representations in games

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INTRODUCTION

Cultural artifacts bear marks of our time and it is possible to extract these through careful analysis. As cultural artifacts, games thus can tell us a great deal about our own culture. Non-human characters offer an interesting perspective to this, as we argue, drawing on Said (1978), that non-humans function as contrasting images that do not only construct the ‘Other’ but also ourselves. As argued by Schröter (2004) for example, in the TV series *Star Trek*, the ways in which the show portrays the alien Borg race as a collective hive mind with a decentralized ship structure and completely egalitarian physical attributes are a reproduction of popular cold war tropes such as the menacing, socialist east block as opposed to the free and democratic western civilization. On a more general level Pias points out how the optimization seeking capitalistic culture lead to the development of action game mechanics (Möring and Leino 2016). Non-human characters appear in abundance in games, which invites speculations on why non-humans seem so captivating to designers and players alike. Furthermore, in games non-human characters have a particular set of functions in relation to the player. Which roles do these ‘Other’ characters serve in the game, are they antagonists or protagonists, objects of estrangement or relationship?

Such questions remain outside the scope of this paper. Instead the aim of this paper is to provide a foundation from which such inquiries can be explored, by proposing a taxonomy of non-human characters in games. As Aarseth (2014) has pointed out, any study of video games needs to be supported by an underlying ontological model. Therefore, we argue that before we can approach high-level questions, such as the above, we need to establish a taxonomy of non-humans in games. We believe that this approach is more fruitful and persistent than individual case studies, as it enables small and big scale studies equally, due to its future adaptability. This taxonomy will be constructed

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based on an empirical study of selected video games. Furthermore, existing studies on non-human characters will inform the taxonomy.

In game studies these non-humans have been approached from different angles. Kim (2005) and Galbraith (2011) focus on different aspects of the relationships between the player and the virtual characters. More related to our research we find studies of single themes of the non-human such as zombies (Krzywinska 2008; Weise 2009; Backe and Aarseth 2013), Aliens (Lizardi 2009), Monsters (Perron 2005) and Ghosts (Janik 2015).

Aside from these more or less related works, the field of game studies is lacking a rigorous study of non-humans in games and relevant works from other fields such as media-, art- and literary studies will also inform the taxonomy proposed in this paper.

Through a preliminary game analysis, we have decided to restrict our focus on the non-human to six themes that we found were present in many games: mutants, aliens, robots, supernatural, mythical creatures and undead. We are intentionally leaving out non-human animals. While acknowledging that we will thus exclude an important category of the non-human, the focus of this analysis rests on research in literature of the fantastic and science fiction, where it has already been pointed out that the technological and fantastic ‘Others’ reflect the moral values (Graham 2002) and fears (Christensen and Christiansen 2012; Schroeter 2004) of the time and societies in which they are constructed.

The Taxonomy

The above-mentioned six themes of non-human characters will serve as a basic classification for the taxonomy’s further development. In the taxonomy, these themes will be classified in terms of their visual representations and of game mechanics. Potential categories for visual representations are ‘humanoids’, ‘animaloids’ and ‘environmentoids’, which can be further distinguished into subcategories (e.g. animaloids into ‘insectoids’, ‘pescoids’, etc.). For the mechanical analysis, we developed the concept of *implied play styles*, which will serve as a basis for classification. As Järvinen (2008) has argued, mechanics lead the player towards a certain behavior through the available choices and restrictions in the game. To be able to thoroughly take into account ‘how the non-humans function’, the *implied play style* results from an interplay of these possibilities and the game objects’ attributes. It follows that the *implied play styles* are part of, but not equal to, the “implied player” (Aarseth 2007). To categorize how the representations of the non-human are reflected on a *play style* level, we preliminarily draw from military tactics, such as swarm tactics and guerilla warfare.

The aim of the proposed taxonomy is, that it will serve as a foundation for future studies of non-humans in games. Studies that can then answer important questions such as what the implications of non-human representation for the ways in which humans are constructed by the games are; whether we can connect (moral) roles to certain kinds of non-humans; If there are any differences in the visual representations of non-humans and how they function on a mechanical layer; whether we can trace historical changes in the representation of non-humans; and what such changes tell us about our culture.

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