

# A Universe Divided: Texts vs. Games in *The Elder Scrolls*

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, I seek to understand how online fan-made archives function as spaces wherein fans of *The Elder Scrolls* construct its narrative universe together, using the web-based archive *The Imperial Library* as a primary tool that facilitates a certain type of fannish engagement known as ‘archontic fandom’. I see fannish discussions surrounding the canonical status of several works within the universe as an entry point into one of the most important underlying controversies of *The Elder Scrolls* as a shared idea between its fans; that is, the tension between the ‘universe-as-games’ and the ‘universe-as-texts’. Some fans give primacy to the written texts found within the universe, and neglect the universe-as-games in their world-building discussions. Consequentially, *The Imperial Library*’s paratextual functioning and overt emphasis on texts come to strengthen the position of the universe-as-texts in relation to the universe-as-games.

## Keywords

archontic fandom, narrative universe, paratext, *The Elder Scrolls*, universe-as-games, universe-as-texts

## INTRODUCTION

*The Elder Scrolls* is one of the most popular and critically acclaimed digital roleplaying game franchises of all time, and with such popularity predictably comes a thriving online community of fans. A significant part of this fandom focuses on collecting and archiving narrative information from the games into web-based archives such as *The Imperial Library* and *The Unofficial Elder Scrolls Pages*. Due to their archival and hypertextual nature, these websites structure and guide these expressions of fandom in tangible but rarely addressed ways. In this paper, I discuss how these archives function as spaces wherein the fans construct this narrative universe together, using the online archives as a tool that facilitates a certain type of fannish engagement known as *archontic fandom* (Hills 2015). Fannish discussions and uncertainty—as chronicled in *The Imperial Library* and, to a lesser extent, *The Unofficial Elder Scrolls Pages*—surrounding the canonical status of several materials within the universe serve as an entry point into one of the most important underlying controversies of *The Elder Scrolls* as a shared idea between its fans: the tension between the ‘universe-as-games’ and the ‘universe-as-texts’. I argue that *The Imperial Library*’s overt emphasis on the universe-as-texts strengthens its position in relation to the universe-as-games, because it provides a gateway into those aspects of the *Elder Scrolls* narrative universe that would ordinarily only be available in-game, that is, through the universe-as-games.

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## ARCHONTIC FANDOM AND FAN-MADE ARCHIVES

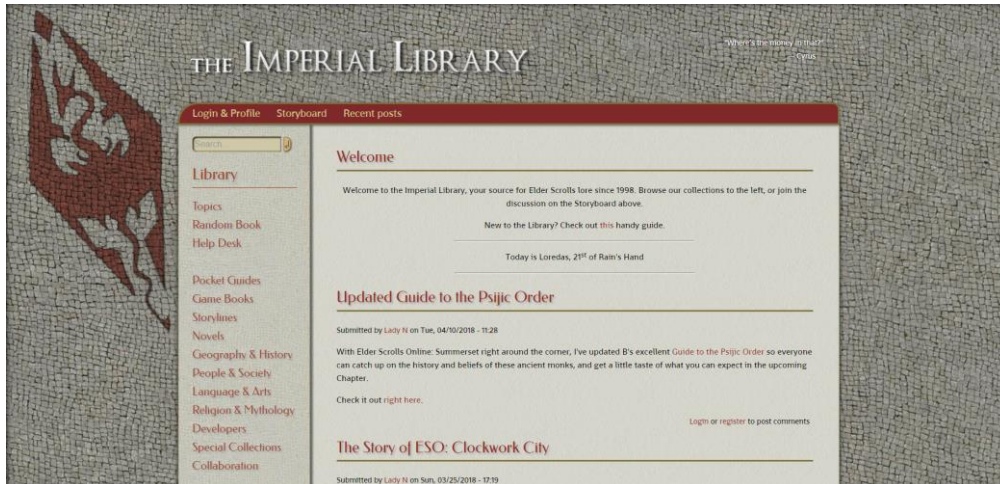
Although Matt Hills was the first to use the term “archontic fandom” (2015, 370), there is quite certainly an important string of ideas that precede and/or surround the concept as I use it here (cf. Derecho 2006; De Kosnik 2016). The first half of the term, ‘archontic’, has its origins in Jacques Derrida’s “archontic principle”, which affords the archivist—in Ancient Greek: the *archon*, the guardian of the *arkheion*, the archive—the power and legitimacy to create the archive, to subject it to categorization and to use the archive for legal or political purposes (Derrida 1995, 10-11). Additionally, “the archontic principle of the archive is also a principle [...] of gathering together” a corpus to be subjected to valorization and cataloguing (10). I use the term ‘archontic fandom’ to make explicit its roots in Derridean philosophy of the archive, which influences my perception of the archives this process produces. My conception of the phenomenon is based on Hills’ own definition of archontic fandom as “fans reading for information that can be extracted from its immediate narrative context and made part of an encyclopedic store” (2015, 370).

Put simply, archontic fandom is the fan-scholarly effort of gathering, archiving and studying information from the *Elder Scrolls* (or any other) narrative universe in order to gain a better understanding of said universe; it is the creation of *fan-made paratextual archives*. In turn, fan-made paratextual archives are the resulting output of an archontic mode of fan engagement, continuously updating and retroactive encyclopedic databases of narrative knowledge about a narrative universe. Most often—though certainly not always, as my own case study here exemplifies—they come in the form of wikis, “exhaustive peer-edited database[s]” (Henton 2012, 85). Paul Booth approaches fan-made wikis/archives as a form of “narrative database”, which he posits as

a reflection of a changed media environment, which reconceptualizes narrative from a ‘chrono-logic’ mode to an archival one. Instead of representing ‘plot’ through causality, fans represent it spatially, using the inherent hypertextuality of the web to create connections between narrative elements. (2016, 85)

Such a connection between database, discussed by Lev Manovich as “a structured collection of data [...] organized for fast search and retrieval by a computer” (2001, 218), and the Derridean archive as existing “simultaneously on literal and abstract planes as both a place of storage [...] and a system that creates the need for, and meaning of, that space and all it contains” (Henton 2012, 71) is a particularly fruitful one for investigations like mine. This allows for the problematization of these narrative databases and their functioning in a similar fashion to how Derrida perceives the tensions inherent in the process of archiving. He sees that questions of who has control over archive are crucially important for the collection and categorization of its corpus, and that in determining what (not!) to archive, the *archons* also deny and destroy certain histories (Derrida 1995, 11; Manoff 2004, 11-12). I would take a similar approach by highlighting “the interplay between [the archives’] physical characteristics and [their] signifying strategies”; in other words, their “materiality” (Hayles 2004, 72), which allows me to not only consider the physical features of these online archives (their hypertextuality and layout), but also to take into account the types of content that they present (narrative knowledge gathered from the universe’s texts and paratexts) and the different ways that different users interact with the archives and their content.

## THE IMPERIAL LIBRARY AS FAN-MADE PARATEXTUAL ARCHIVE



**Figure 1:** The *Library*'s home page (22 April 2018)

The fan-made paratextual archive from which I derive most of my evidence and insights is known as *The Imperial Library* (<https://www.imperial-library.info/>; see Figure 1). This is a web-based archive that holds almost every single in-game and out-of-game book from *The Elder Scrolls* franchise, as well as (among other things) elaborate descriptions of the games' main storylines, preserved forum posts by both fans and the series' developers, and encyclopedic entries on subjects such as the races, languages and mythology of the *Elder Scrolls* universe. In some important respects, it is quite different from the other prominent *Elder Scrolls* archive I occasionally draw from here, *The Unofficial Elder Scrolls Pages (UESP)*; (<https://en.uesp.net/>).<sup>1</sup> For instance, the *Library* runs on the Drupal CMS (content management system), in contrast to most fan-made archives, including *UESP*, which run on MediaWiki. This significantly affects how power relations are structured on-site. Previous discussions of paratextual archives such as these have been rather inattentive to the power dynamics that arise between members of a knowledge community (cf. Booth 2016; Mittell 2009). I agree with Hills that “such descriptions of digital fandom fail to significantly engage with fandom as itself (re)performing expertise” (2015, 361). He asserts that it would be “overly celebratory” to suggest that fan-made archives make no distinction between professionals and amateurs (372), and we can see this clearly in *The Imperial Library*.

In the *Library*, the hierarchical differentiation between regular visitors and the fans who maintain the website is in some ways far more pronounced than it would be elsewhere. In this hierarchy, the “Librarians” are the most important, and they enjoy a high level of fannish authority. Together with their “Assistant Librarians”, they represent the *Library* on other platforms, answer questions within the *Library*'s forums, and, most significantly, they are the only ones who have editing rights. There is very little information to be found about how to become a staff member of *The Imperial Library*, it appears to be a matter of being active on the forums and proving one's expertise regarding *Elder Scrolls* lore. One might relate this to Mia Consalvo's notion of “gaming capital” (2007, 3–5), though the type of expertise valued in the *Library* is not necessarily of a ludic nature. However, there is also the matter of how the archive's very structure itself affects those dynamics, and how it presents and categorizes the content being archived on-site, which I discuss in the next section.

## ON PARATEXTUAL FUNCTIONS AND MATERIALITY

What exactly makes these fan-made archives paratextual? Naturally, the distinction between a text and its paratextual elements—that is, elements which surround a text and provide gateways into that text (Genette 1997, 1), including the text’s author and title, but also interviews and commentaries—is an arbitrary one that primarily serves an analytical purpose. After all, “[paratexts] are separated from the text by at least a minimum distance, [...] but at the same time they are characterized by a certain proximity to the text” (Stanitzek 2005, 31). As Gérard Genette himself states, “the paratext is itself a text: if it is still not *the* text it is already *some* text” (1997, 7). Much of the writing on paratexts for digital games primarily discusses “peritexts” and “epitexts” (Genette 1997, 5), paratexts that are respectively found inside and outside the physical boundaries of the texts they engage with and that “guide the reader’s attention [and] influence how a text is read” (Stanitzek 2005, 34–35; cf. Carter 2015; Glas 2016). Jan Švelch has noted that, in digital games and games culture, “the boundaries between texts are often too fluid and complicated to be put into two clear-cut categories” (2016, 2). This holds true for *The Elder Scrolls*: the books and texts archived within the fan-made archives mentioned above are certainly intimately connected with the games from an anti-formalist point of view. However, when we scholars take the perspective of the players and fans of the franchise into account, as I argue we should, it is undeniable that there are still texts with a “perceived ancillary role” (ibid.) in the narrative universe, and that some (para)textual elements are considered to be more important in some discussions than others.<sup>2</sup> More on that later in this paper.

As might be surmised from the aforementioned, the materiality of fan-made paratextual archives can enforce and reinforce such differences and dynamics in very real ways. One prominent instance of this materiality at work can be found in how the archive itself functions as *paratext to its own corpus*, as its spatial organization and use of tags, notes and hyperlinks quite significantly influence whether and how any given text within that archive is going to be read (Lindgren Leavenworth 2015, 57). This type of paratextual elements is in fact how the power of the archive expresses itself most overtly: the archive and its guardians decide which texts are easily found and which are obscured, which texts are provided with extra comments and which are presented ‘bare’, which texts are to be taken seriously as part of the *Elder Scrolls* universe and which are not. By understanding and studying the fan-made archive and the texts housed within it through this paratextual frame, I aim to make explicit and highlight how the mythos of the *Elder Scrolls* universe as established through the franchise’s ‘official’ paratexts can occupy a contested position within the archive. I would simultaneously demonstrate how the *Library*’s materiality reinforces a certain hierarchy between different types of content within the franchise, specifically between the games and the texts found both within and without those games.

## THE ELDER SCROLLS AS NARRATIVE UNIVERSE

My understanding of the narrative universe of *The Elder Scrolls* derives from what Lisbeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca have called “transmedial worlds”, which they define as

abstract content systems from which a repertoire of fictional stories and characters can be actualized or derived across a variety of media forms. What characterises a transmedial world is that audience and designers share a mental image of the “worldness” (a number of distinguishing features of its universe). The idea of a specific world’s worldness mostly originates from the first version of the world presented, but can be elaborated and changed over time. Quite

often the world has a cult (fan) following across media as well.  
(Klastrup and Tosca 2004, 409)

The core of such transmedial worlds, their ‘worldness’, generally consists of three elements: “mythos”, “topos”, and “ethos” (Klastrup and Tosca 2004, 412). *Mythos* can be thought of as “the backstory that gives meaning to the current situation of the world” (Klastrup and Tosca 2014, 297); in other words, the ‘lore’. In *The Elder Scrolls*, this entails a.o. the universe’s creation myths, heroic legends, and the chronicles of the planet Nirn. The mythos establishes how the audience should “interact with or interpret events in the world” (2004, 412). *Topos* is the geographical and historical setting of the world: *The Elder Scrolls* is mostly set on the continent of Tamriel, a neomedieval fantasy realm. The topos allows one to know “what is to be expected from the physics of and navigation in the world” (ibid.). *Ethos* should be seen as the “the explicit and implicit ethics, or the moral codex” that govern (parts of) the world (Klastrup and Tosca 2014, 297). It serves to define how any given character can or should be expected behave. Some transmedial worlds, especially those based in high fantasy, have strictly binary moral codices wherein ‘good’ and ‘evil’ are clearly separated. In *The Elder Scrolls*, however, this dichotomy is often disrupted, and questions of what is right and what is wrong are frequently left open, though some characters are considerably more morally ambiguous than others. This approach to storyworlds is most useful when addressing archontic fandom and its archives because it emphasizes the constructed fictional world not as a collection of characters, events or stories, but as a “shared idea of the world [...] that situates the ontological status of the [transmedial world] in a disembodied plane” (Klastrup and Tosca 2014, 297), a space to be explored and exploited by storytellers and archivists alike.

What I must also remark on is my choice of words for this concept: I do not use the term ‘transmedial world’ but opt for *narrative universe* instead. I take this term from Hills, who describes the narrative universe, or “hyperdiegesis”, as a “narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text, but which nevertheless appears to operate according to principles of internal logic and extension” (Hills 2002, 137). His definition, like transmedial world theory, places the emphasis on the internal logic (mythos, topos and ethos) that underlies every instance of the universe regardless of the texts and media that depict it. Naturally, this idea of ‘internal logic’ plays a very important role in deciding what is considered canon or ‘lore-friendly’ and what is not—a question that both fan-made and developer-made texts are subjected to. In addition, I prefer the term ‘narrative universe’ because it quite strongly invokes the sense that the fiction being constructed extends beyond the immediate setting of the story being told at any given time. As I have mentioned, *The Elder Scrolls* takes place mostly on Tamriel, but there is more to the fiction than that: there are other continents on the planet Nirn, there are alternate planes of existence inhabited by gods (Aedra) and demons (Daedra), there is an entire cosmology and several different creation myths—in other words, beyond the *world* there is a veritable *universe*. The narrative universe, then, is the shared mental construct that we collectively call *The Elder Scrolls*.

The narrative universe brought to life by the *Elder Scrolls* games and their accompanying paratexts is incredibly complex. Of course, this complexity stems in part from the creativity of its writers and their many sources of inspiration, which range from Tolkienesque high fantasy to Aleister Crowley’s *Magick in Theory and Practice*. Moreover, as was highlighted in a well-known forum thread:

For a game series spanning 22 years, 15 games, more than a dozen DLCs, two novels, and numerous bonus materials, all written by different people in different studios at different times, and often

contradicting, it is hard to determine what “official” entails. The universe is always progressing and always changing hands.<sup>3</sup> (LadyNerevar, “How to Become a Lore Buff” 2016, entry 8)

Inconsistencies within this ever-progressing universe, intentional or otherwise, frequently provoke discussion among fans and a desire to investigate further into the matter at hand. Some such instances serve to highlight the *Elder Scrolls* universe as a storyworld that unfolds across a variety of mediums by demonstrating that different mediums can actualize the franchise’s hyperdiegesis in radically different ways. To once again cite the aforementioned forum thread: “According to [*The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, there are about 25 houses in all of Chorrol [a prominent city in the province of Cyrodiil, red.]. Obviously, this is false” (LadyNerevar 2016, entry 8). This particular discrepancy and others like it—that is, those that stem from the occasionally astronomical distance between Tamriel as described in written texts and Tamriel as depicted in the *Elder Scrolls* games—are not so much intentional as they are inevitable due to the medium-specific technological affordances of digital games. It would simply have been impossible to ‘accurately’ depict the cities of Cyrodiil in one game, especially around the time when *Oblivion* (Bethesda Game Studios 2006) was made. As Jesper Juul notes, “games are a double movement – giving us access to new fictional worlds but then giving us only limited options in those worlds in order to make a game” (2014, 190). All of these difficulties within the narrative universe of *The Elder Scrolls* are recorded and reported on in *The Imperial Library* and other archives. The true difficulty then begins *within* those archives, where the question is not only “What to archive?”, but also “What *is* the *Elder Scrolls* narrative universe?”

## **BROWSING THE LIBRARY**

Studying how the fan-made archive reflects and influences the difficulties mentioned above naturally involves, first and foremost, archival research (Boellstorff et al. 2012, 120-21); that is, studying the texts housed within the archive and the archival structure itself. Simultaneously, it is imperative to not only focus on structures and texts, but also on the archive’s users and how they interact with/conceive of the narrative universe archived on websites like *The Imperial Library*. For this purpose, I analyzed pre-existing forum discussions and also directly engaged with the community by creating my own forum thread in the *Library*. The direct contact with the community yielded important new insights and, most significantly, allowed me to gain a better understanding of *why* some of the dynamics and trends within the fandom are the way they are (which I expand upon later in this paper).

Regarding the ethics of this methodology, Hills argues that scholar-fans such as myself often risk explicitly or implicitly speaking for “their own situated fan agency, or indeed [...] their [own] academic, disciplinary position” instead of for the fandom they are studying (2012, 32). Every scholar relates differently to their object of study, and that relation must be made more explicit more often, according to Hills, so that the “limits of academic and fan knowledge” become clearer to both the discipline and its audience (ibid., 33). To that effect, I should state that my interest in these matters is mostly driven by my preference for the *Elder Scrolls* games and their lore, not by any previous deep engagement with the communities on-site or the archives themselves. This position initially posed some problems regarding the accurate portrayal of this fandom: while I personally ascribe certain meanings to the archival structures within which users express their fandom, it is important that these ascriptions should at least be informed by the views of the community itself and do proper justice to the culture they have collectively created (Boellstorff et al. 2012, 149–50). This is why my own contribution to the *Library*’s forum heavily emphasizes my desire to acquire perspectives other than my own on how the *Elder Scrolls* universe and its fandom operate. The analysis I present here is meant to reflect the

synthesis of those other fannish perspectives and my own as fairly and accurately as possible.<sup>4</sup>

## THE CANONICITY OF ‘OBSCURE TEXTS’

Where do *Elder Scrolls* fans expect to find canon material in the first place? The answer is, unsurprisingly, not simply “in the *Elder Scrolls* games.” As mentioned previously, *The Elder Scrolls* is more than a digital game franchise: there are two novels published, the collector’s editions of some instalments come with physical books written by in-universe characters, and (former) developers of the franchise will still occasionally release texts and images that add to the universe’s already extensive lore. Texts in the latter category are referred to as ‘obscure texts’ within the fandom and they are often the sources considered most questionable when it comes to the development of fan-scholarly writings about the *Elder Scrolls* universe. That said, other paratexts and even the games themselves are not free from skepticism, as I discuss in the next section. Here, I first address one such obscure text and its contested position within the universe to illustrate how such fannish uncertainty may be reflected in the archive.

“The Trial at Hogithum Hall”, also commonly referred to as “The Trial of Vivec”, is the name given to an extensive forum roleplay performed by a group of (former) *Elder Scrolls* developers, including Michael Kirkbride, Ken Rolston and Ted Peterson, and prominent members of the fan community in 2004, two years after the release of *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* (Bethesda Game Studios 2002).<sup>5</sup> The previously mentioned “How to Become a Lore Buff” thread states that the canonicity of the “Trial” is “one of the most hotly debated issues in the study of lore” (LadyNerevar 2016, entry 8). One place of many where ‘hot debates’ about the “Trial” have occurred is the discussion page of “Lore:Vivec (god)” on *UESP*, where a user calls out another for adding “non-canon material” to the page (Rpeh 2008).<sup>6</sup> This sparks a heavy discussion on both the canonicity of the “Trial” and on the definition and importance of ‘*Elder Scrolls* canon’ at large. The participants in that discussion proceed to articulate quite aptly the opposing sides in the canonicity debate: “it’s not official until there’s official word from Bethesda” (Rpeh 2008) versus “[t]here is no canon and non-canon in the study of lore, only knowledge” (Temple-Zero 2008). Of course, as another fan points out, things are not so black-and-white:

Deciding what is canon and what is not is very difficult. If you want to say that [Michael Kirkbride’s] texts are canon, does that make the other dev’s texts also canon? [...] The matter is further complicated by the fact that the Trial of Vivec was [a roleplay]. Does this make certain facts from the [roleplays] where the dev [Ted Peterson] played a role also canon? (Apothis2412 2008)

*The Imperial Library* also reflects the complicated nature of determining the status of such paratexts and demonstrates that conflicting accounts and perspectives can arise even from a single archive. This begins with the manner in which the text itself is presented within the archive.<sup>7</sup> First, not the full text but only an extensive summary is made readily available. The text is also archived under Vivec’s character page, instead of in more prominent places like the “Thread Archives” of the “Developers” section or the “Obscure Texts” section, making it more difficult to find—unless one is actively looking for it, like I was. Finally, in the Librarian’s comment prefacing the text, it is said to be “considered semi-official” by the *Elder Scrolls* fandom, but that “one must remember that so far there is no official word from [Bethesda] regarding this play”. Especially the latter two points are quite indicative of how seriously the “Trial” is contested, and elsewhere in the *Library* there are more signals that its canonicity is questionable: in the “Post Archives”, there are records of both Ken

Rolston and Ted Peterson claiming that the “Trial” is not canon because it is not referenced in-game.<sup>8</sup> At the same time however, the events of the “Trial” are listed in the *Library*’s historical timeline of the Third Era, and one of the articles in the “Forum Scholars Guild” uses the “Trial” as an important source (Astion 2010), both of which would position it as a valid contribution to the mythos of *The Elder Scrolls*. Through its archival function as a paratext to its own corpus, by which it can serve to either “strengthen [or weaken] the authorial authority” of the texts within that corpus (Lindgren Leavenworth 2015, 57), in this case the *Library* appears quite undecided.

## UNIVERSE-AS-GAMES AND UNIVERSE-AS-TEXTS

Why is the “Trial” such a contested case? Out of all the different archontic fan sites dedicated to *The Elder Scrolls*, the *Library* is usually the most receptive, archiving developer-made texts and images, seemingly without much ado. On close inspection, it appears that some fans simply dislike some developers’ out-of-game contributions to the *Elder Scrolls* universe, presumably because of their often profane and enigmatic style. Others place the blame specifically on the setting and the medium of the paratext, as it was a spontaneously written piece to which fans contributed significantly, which in their eyes diminishes the value of the whole text. Yet others argue that only the lore that is found in-game and/or in other official Bethesda outputs counts as ‘true’ lore. For the latter two groups, exemplified by the discussion in the previous section, the worldness of *The Elder Scrolls* thus comes from only one place, Bethesda, and the ‘real’ *Elder Scrolls* universe does not exist beyond that company’s products. An even more extreme position, implicitly advocated by *UESP* through its explicit marking of sources that were found “OOG” (out-of-game), is that *all* narrative information presented outside of the games is questionable to some degree—which includes the Bethesda-sanctioned novels by Greg Keyes, for instance. These arguments obviously do not entirely explain why specifically *The Imperial Library* has such trouble with the “Trial”; perhaps the person who posted the “Trial” summary dislikes out-of-game lore, or the Librarian in question had just witnessed or participated in another argument about the text’s canonicity. However, the positions taken in by the text’s opponents bring me to a crucial source of uncertainty within the narrative universe, and by extension the fandom of *The Elder Scrolls*: the tension between the universe-as-games and the universe-as-texts.

The relationship between the games and the texts (by which I mean written texts such as in-game literature, but also out-of-game obscure texts such as the “Trial”) of *The Elder Scrolls* is an interesting one: to state it boldly, the universe-as-games can exist without the universe-as-texts, but the reverse claim is much harder to sustain—or at least *seems* harder to sustain. So far, I have been speaking in principle about the universe-as-texts and paying less attention to the universe-as-games, and while *The Imperial Library* does record spoken dialogues and played storyline events from the *Elder Scrolls* games, the archive’s overt emphasis lies solidly on in-game literature and other written texts. The distinction is a somewhat artificial one to make, as the games and the texts are inextricably intertwined, but this very intertwinement makes the distinction productive. As mentioned, it is possible to experience the *Elder Scrolls* universe without ever encountering the universe-as-texts: the games themselves present a rich and exquisitely built environment for the player to explore and to experience, all the while playing through major events in Tamrielic history—or not, if the player so chooses. *Morrowind*, for instance, allows the player to subvert the game’s entire plot by making all NPCs killable, including those who are essential to the main quest. The player might even decide to avoid any questline of significance altogether and simply roam the countryside in search of “happy times, exploring, fighting, and pearl-diving, in a vast landscape filled with countless wonders” (Aarseth 2007, 10). There is no real *need* for such players to read the books that are scattered throughout the gameworld to become acquainted with the narrative universe; they can



create their own entirely valid understanding of what constitutes that narrative universe, facilitated by the *Elder Scrolls* games as “spaces ripe with narrative possibility” (Jenkins 2004, 119).

Seen from this perspective, the challenge that the universe-as-games poses to the universe-as-texts becomes quite tangible: all *Elder Scrolls* texts are initially reliant on the games for their sheer existence, because the universe-as-games precedes the universe-as-texts (the series’ first instalment did not feature any in-game books), and because the vast majority of the texts are physically found *in-game* and nowhere else—until someone includes them in a paratextual archive, of course. Though they nowadays admittedly only go un-archived for a few weeks at most, until they are indeed archived, there is no escaping the universe-as-games for these texts. However, to dismiss them as in-text paratexts, thereby at least suggesting a degree of inferiority to the games, would not do their significant importance to the *Elder Scrolls* narrative universe and its fandom justice. In fact, to some fans at the *Library*, the universe-as-texts takes precedence over the universe-as-games and becomes their primary reference for what they consider the ‘official’ universe, as shown by, for example, discussions around whether the depiction of Cyrodiil’s bland, largely pastoral environment in *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion* can be considered a canon instance of the universe’s topos, as it was suspected to conflict with earlier descriptions of the province in written texts (Tiber II, “From a Lore Perspective” 2016, #0).<sup>9</sup> Moreover, much of the appreciation for *Morrowind* in the *Library*, where it is widely considered the best entry in the series, appears to stem from the fact that the game “fleshed out most of the lore” (Tiber II 2016, #12). It can thus be said that fan-made paratextual archives serve to *strengthen* the position of the universe-as-texts by making it available outside of the gameplay, thereby providing another gateway into the *Elder Scrolls* universe, becoming “a ‘vestibule’ that offers [...] the possibility of either stepping in or turning back” (Genette 1997, 2). When the emphasis shifts from the universe-as-games to the universe-as-texts in this way, perhaps originally out-of-game texts also become more likely to be considered canon – even though some texts clearly face more difficulty than others.

## FANNISH PERSPECTIVES ON THE DIVIDED UNIVERSE

Like most other fandoms, the fans of *The Elder Scrolls* prove exceptionally thoughtful in the way they understand the material they so adore. Naturally then, I am not the first to perceive this divide between texts and games, and I am not the first person to codify their musings on the nature of *The Elder Scrolls* as a narrative universe.<sup>10</sup> According to one of the Librarians, their community’s heavy emphasis on the universe-as-texts was instituted “intentionally and explicitly,” because

[b]y limiting the discussion of lore to the written materials we could avoid unsatisfying discussions about gameplay. [For instance] trying to explain why each game categorizes the spells into different schools. *The [video games] got in the way of our imagination.*<sup>11</sup> (Prowler, “Research on Fandom and Status in The Imperial Library” 2018, #3; emphasis mine)

Another long-time member of the *Library* elaborates on this further:

I would expect that this is the case naturally in any discussion of fictional lore, especially one based on [video games]. The point of a lore discussion is to focus on world-building [...] while simultaneously keeping a tension of one foot in the real world to discern those things which don't actually contribute to world-building. In this sense, *the video games as a franchise are*

*accidental*; [...] they are irrelevant to the discussion, except when the discussions have to enter the meta-realm and debate whether something should count as a piece of the world-building architecture [such as the *Oblivion* discussion]. As Proweler notes, many of the gameplay elements naturally came to be seen as accidental as well in that they are elements that had no intentionality behind them in terms of world-building. [Text-based resources], however, always had some level of intentionality behind them and therefore were naturally given primacy. [...] This process was organic, not one imposed by the structure of the library. It might be said that *the library formalized this model cultivated through our interactions on the forums*, it didn't invent it. (Luagar 2018, #4; emphases mine)

While much of this explanation speaks for itself, it is noteworthy from the perspective of both fan studies and game studies that fannish discussions about the storyworld of *The Elder Scrolls* appear to reject the rules and mechanics as parts of that world. As I illustrated earlier, the fans are well aware that digital games present a certain “level of abstraction” (Juul 2014, 176), they are indeed limits upon one’s imagination because they impose concrete restrictions on the world itself; the true vastness of Tamriel as described in the texts can never be replicated in a game. It seems obvious to connect the idea that game rules and mechanics do not contribute to narrative worldbuilding with the argument of early ludology that “games are not narratives, [...] because the characteristics of games are incompatible with some of the most widely accepted definitions of narrative” (Frasca 2003, 96). That said, I would contend that these fans do not discard the narrativity of games, but rather believe that the games do not perform the same type of worldbuilding functions that they are looking for in their discussions of the lore (mythos) of *The Elder Scrolls*. If anything, they likely see the games’ narrative affordances as obstacles for telling their own, even more personal stories.

The fans I spoke with emphasize that the *Library*’s implicit focus on the universe-as-texts resulted organically from their forum discussions, but they are evidently also conscious of the fact that this focus now structures the kinds of interactions that the fans have with/on the website. The *Library* then, as an archive, does not only serve the Derridean function of determining what is worthy of inclusion in the narrative universe. It also serves as an archive in the Foucauldian sense, as both “the law of what can be said” and as “that which determines that all these things said do not accumulate endlessly in an amorphous mass” (Foucault 1972, 129). In other words, it formalizes the discourse around the storyworld of *The Elder Scrolls*, makes certain discussions (and positions within those discussions) more ‘valid’ than others, and makes the universe-as-texts a more legitimate resource in conversations about world-building than the universe-as-games.

There are, unsurprisingly, plenty of fans who would not agree with such a view about what the *Elder Scrolls* universe entails. The aforementioned thread on the canonicity of *Oblivion*, for example, shows that even in the text-focused *Library* there are prominent members and Librarians who hold the games to be the primary source of fannish knowledge of the universe’s topos; that is, Tamriel’s landscape, scenery and climate:

NPCs and books are not meaningless. We can use them as a source to get an idea of a land we've never seen, but the moment we get the chance to actually visit that land and see for our own eyes what it actually looks like, then *there would no longer be a need for those books*. (Tailin Sero 2016, #40; emphasis mine)

For these fans, the fact that *The Elder Scrolls* is a digital game franchise is far from accidental: they view its gameworlds as physical manifestations of places one could previously only imagine, as somehow *more real* than the universe described in the texts. This is, of course, a perfectly legitimate view, and considering the ability of these games to “give concrete shape to our memories and imaginings of the storyworld [and] creating an immersive environment we can wander through and interact with” (Jenkins 2004, 124), it is not a surprising view either. On the other hand, we might also see it as a reflection of a desire for a certain degree of structure and hierarchy in the narrative universe of *The Elder Scrolls*. In a sense, that hierarchy is precisely what the *Library* provides, even if the dominant perspective within that archival structure is the very opposite one. Given what I have written here, it is at least interesting to end on the note that another group of fans tends to take the games’ virtual and visual depictions of Tamriel as more authoritative than ‘mere’ writing, to which they ascribe a more speculative role. The archive may be authoritative, but it is certainly not definitive.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of drawing comparisons between the *Library* and other *Elder Scrolls*-related fan websites, I refer to a.o. the *Unofficial Elder Scrolls Pages*, the *Elder Scrolls* subreddit, and the official Bethesda forums wherever necessary and appropriate.

<sup>2</sup> A similar argument, and the subsequent execution of that argument, can be found in the third chapter of *The Meaning of Video Games: Gaming and Textual Strategies* (Jones 2008) concerning the universe of *Halo*.

<sup>3</sup> The source thread was written by one of the most prominent members of the *Elder Scrolls* lore community and can be found here: <https://bethesda.net/community/topic/13875/how-to-become-a-lore-buff>.

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, my own impressions initially did not align fully with the views of the community itself, and my perspective on certain topics shifted radically as I interacted with the community more.

<sup>5</sup> The most complete version of the text was posted to the *Elder Scrolls* reddit: [https://www.reddit.com/r/teslore/comments/tjfqx/the\\_trial\\_at\\_hogithum\\_hall/](https://www.reddit.com/r/teslore/comments/tjfqx/the_trial_at_hogithum_hall/).

<sup>6</sup> See: [http://en.uesp.net/wiki/Lore\\_talk:Vivec\\_\(god\)](http://en.uesp.net/wiki/Lore_talk:Vivec_(god)).

<sup>7</sup> See: <https://www.imperial-library.info/content/trial-vivec>.

<sup>8</sup> See: <https://www.imperial-library.info/content/forum-archives-ted-peterson> and <https://www.imperial-library.info/content/forum-archive-ken-rolston>.

<sup>9</sup> See: <https://www.imperial-library.info/content/lore-perspective-should-oblivions-cyrodiil-be-considered-canon>.

<sup>10</sup> One example would be Ochsner and Martin's excellent paper on the motivations of fan participation and the quality of writing in *Mass Effect* and *Elder Scrolls* archives (2013). More tangentially related to my topic here is Gallagher, Jong, and Sinervo's media archaeological work on the cultural status of modders in the "mythology of Bethesda Softworks" (2017).

<sup>11</sup> See: <https://www.imperial-library.info/content/research-fandom-and-status-imperial-library>.