

The Magic Hermaphrodite, the Face-Snaked Queen and the Clockwork King – Queer Analysis of the Tribunal in *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*

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## Abstract

The purpose of this bachelor's thesis is to provide a comprehensive queer analysis of Almalexia, Sotha Sil and Vivec who appear in the video game *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, its story expansion *The Elder Scrolls III: Tribunal*, and the in-game self-referential metatexts authored by the character Vivec himself, *The Thirty-Six Lessons of Vivec*. Through a thematic approach, the theories of queer game studies, processes of othering against queer identities, and the hegemony of institutionalized heteronormativity, this thesis aims to analyze the queer performances of Almalexia, Sotha Sil and Vivec and to discuss how, despite a video game having queer characters in major roles, the existence of heteronormative dynamics can still prevail underneath a surface-level representational narrative.

## Tiivistelmä

Tämän kandidaatintyön tarkoitus on antaa kattava queer-analyysi hahmoista Almalexia, Sotha Sil ja Vivec, jotka esiintyvät *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*-videopelissä sekä sen tarinaa jatkavassa *The Elder Scrolls III: Tribunal*-lisäosassa, ja pelien sisäisissä, Vivecin kirjoittamissa itseän viittaavissa metateksteissä *The Thirty-Six Lessons of Vivec*. Teoreettiset lähtökohdat, joihin työn temaattinen analyysi pohjautuu, ovat queer-pelitutkimus, queer-identiteetteihin kohdistuva toiseus sekä institutionaalisen heteronormatiivisuuden hegemonia. Vaikka Almalexia, Sotha Sil ja Vivec ovat hahmoja, joiden queer-identiteetit ovat näkyvässä osassa, heteronormatiivinen dynamiikka on silti läsnä heidän representatiivisen narratiivin pinnan alla.

Keywords: Heteronormativity, othering, queer theory, queer game studies, video games

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## 1 Introduction

The purpose of this bachelor's thesis is to analyse the various ways in which queerness is represented in the video game *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, and to examine how queer themes are present in the lore and non-playable characters of *Morrowind*. The focus of the analysis are the three God-Kings of the land of Morrowind – Almalexia, Sotha Sil and Vivec– who form a triad of worship known as the Tribunal. Almalexia, Sotha Sil and Vivec have a significant part in the storytelling of the video game, functioning either as allies or enemies for the player character. My aim is to examine how a role-playing game that does not emphasize relationships between the player and the non-playable characters includes queer themes, and in what ways the world of *Morrowind* includes LGBTQ representation in direct or indirect ways through the Tribunal.

Researching queer representation in modern video games has grown in popularity in contemporary queer game studies which, in majority, has examined popular role-playing game franchises such as *Dragon Age* and *Mass Effect*, both developed by Bioware Studios. (Greer, 2013; Krobová et al., 2015; Malkowski et al., 2017; Shaw & Friesem, 2016; Shaw et al., 2019). What these role-playing games have in common is that they apply story-driven, character-focused narratives where the player character is able to deepen their bond with various non-playable characters and form romantic relationships with them. The motivation for this thesis stems from the realization that while *The Elder Scrolls* franchise is also situated in the role-play genre, barely any research on *The Elder Scrolls* has been done from the point of view of queer game studies.

While LGBTQ representation in video games has increased, the video game industry is still regarded as “the least progressive form of media representation despite being one of the newest mediated forms” (Malkowski et al., 2017, p. 2). According to Shaw's et al. (2019) analysis on LGBTQ representation in video games published in 1985-2005, the portrayal of sexual and gender minorities in games has either been avoided or has been done through “egregious stereotyping” (p. 2). However, while extensive, Shaw's et al. study does not make any reference to *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* despite the game being published in 2002 and including queer characters in major roles. Thus, I will seek to fill this gap in

the Shaw's et al. (2019) work and include *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* into the broader context of queer game studies on role-playing games.

I will begin my thesis by first outlining the research material which includes an introduction to *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, its story, setting and game mechanics. The lore of *Morrowind* will be discussed, as the major part of analysis will be the in-game book series *The Thirty-Six Lessons of Vivec*, written by the character Vivec who is one of the Tribunal gods. These self-referential metatexts contain queer themes and offer insight on the Tribunal and their feats before the events of *Morrowind*. In theoretical and methodological framework, I will further define queer game studies and outline the approaches that will be used in the analysis. Defining what is meant by 'queerness' in the context of this thesis will also be discussed. Lastly, as themes of othering are present in the lore of the Tribunal, the relation between queer theory and othering will be examined. In the conclusion of the thesis, I will take into consideration the limitations and future possibilities of my thesis topic.

## **2 Description of the research material**

The material used for this thesis includes the video game *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, its later story expansion *The Elder Scrolls III: Tribunal*, as well as the in-game texts *The Thirty-Six Lessons of Vivec*. The central part which will be analyzed are the characters Almalexia, Sotha Sil and Vivec who all appear in the material. However, the roles which Almalexia, Sotha Sil and Vivec have in the video games and *The Lessons* are not equal. For example, while the player is able to interact with Almalexia and Vivec, they cannot do so with Sotha Sil, and need to rely on second-hand information on him. For these reasons, it is to be acknowledged that Almalexia, Sotha Sil and Vivec will not be equally represented in this thesis because of their uneven amounts of appearance and interactions with the player, as well as in *The Thirty-Six Lessons of Vivec*.

### **2.1 *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind***

*The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* is an open-world role-playing game published by Bethesda Softworks in 2002. It is the third installment of *The Elder Scrolls* franchise and it is set on an island of Vvardenfell located in the land of Morrowind. The themes of adventure, exploration and the freedom bestowed

upon the player are the trademarks of *The Elder Scrolls* franchise. The player assumes the role of a prophesied Nerevarine, a reincarnation of a fallen hero whose destiny is to save Morrowind from an ancient evil. As *Morrowind* is a role-playing game, the player has the freedom to choose their play style and how they approach the events in the game. They are able to explore the world, approach the main storyline from different angles or even ignore it completely. However, unlike the following releases of *The Elder Scrolls* franchise. *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* places heavy emphasis on the player taking the initiative to spend time reading in-game texts to gain a better understanding of the main storyline and its context. The game has limited voice acting, meaning that the majority of dialogue is presented in a text-based form.

## **2.2 Introduction of the Tribunal gods Almalexia, Sotha Sil and Vivec**

As the player advances in *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, they are able to learn about the Tribunal which is formed by three God-Kings Almalexia, Sotha Sil and Vivec, who rule Morrowind and its people, the Dunmer. Vivec, who is the most prominent of the Tribunal, directly assists the player character on their quest to defeat the game's antagonist. While Almalexia and Sotha Sil are only mentioned in the main story of *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, they make a direct appearance in a later expansion, *The Elder Scrolls III: Tribunal*. However, while Almalexia has a significant role in this expansion, Sotha Sil's role is minimal. He appears in the very end of *Tribunal's* storyline and he does not have any dialogue unlike Almalexia due to being dead for the entirety of the events of the expansion.

As individual characters, Almalexia, Sotha Sil and Vivec embody various identities, values and representations – qualities which have been interweaved into the narrative of *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*. Lore-wise, the lives of Almalexia, Sotha Sil and Vivec are portrayed as complex and mysterious, and their rise to power as the Tribunal is a controversial topic in the canon storyline of *The Elder Scrolls* franchise. While the Tribunal claim their divinity is a result of their virtuous deeds during their mortal lives, those who resist their rule believe that the Tribunal murdered their close friend in order to steal the divine essence of an ancient artifact they had previously sworn to leave alone (*Lore: Almalexia* ). Upon this betrayal, the Tribunal caused the Dunmer to turn into elves with ashen skin and red eyes, a transformation which the Tribunal then declared to be a blessing instead of a curse (*Lore: Almalexia* ).

### **2.2.1 Almalexia**

Almalexia, the only woman in the Tribunal, is portrayed as “the source of compassion, sympathy, and forgiveness, the protector of the poor and weak, and the patron of teachers and healers” (*Lore: Almalexia.* ) (for an image of her appearance, see figure 1). However, Almalexia’s disposition shifts during the events of *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, and when the player meets her in the expansion *The Elder Scrolls III: Tribunal*, she has become paranoid and covertly hostile towards her worshippers as well as obsessed with “maintaining her image at the expense of everything else” (*Lore: Almalexia.* ). In the end of the *Tribunal* expansion, she ambushes the player and monologues how she plans to center all worship to herself and become the only true god: “Your death will end this prophecy and unite my people again under one god, one faith, one rule by my divine law. [...] Those who do not yield will be destroyed. [...] For now, you face the one true god” (*Tribunal: Almalexia.* n.d.). The player is forced to fight Almalexia in the ending of the *Tribunal* expansion, resulting in her death. Almalexia’s other name is Ayem which is used in *The Thirty-Six Lessons of Vivec*.

### **2.2.2 Sotha Sil**

Sotha Sil, also known as “The Clockwork King” (*36 Lessons of Vivec.* n.d.), embodies mystery and magic, and he is regarded as the most reclusive and wise of the Tribunal Gods. Unlike Almalexia and Vivec, Sotha Sil does not commune with his worshippers, instead choosing to spend his life doing research in his Clockwork City, a sanctuary of his own making (*Tribunal: Sotha Sil.* n.d.). His fascination with technology manifests in his appearance too: in the *Tribunal* expansion, it can be seen that he has replaced most of his body with mechanical parts and what is left of him is supported by wires attached to a larger machine (see figure 2). The player does not directly meet Sotha Sil – merely his lifeless body – and thus the only information about him is available from the other two Tribunals as well as from *The Thirty-Six Lessons of Vivec*. According to Almalexia, Sotha Sil “grew weary of mortal imperfections, and retired to his Clockwork City, where he reshapes life, and some say the very world, into an image he finds pleasing” whereas before “[h]e spent time among these mortals, instructing them, counseling them, protecting them from harm” (*Tribunal: Almalexia.* n.d.). In *The Thirty-Six Lessons of Vivec*, Sotha Sil is also addressed as Seht.

### 2.2.3 Vivec

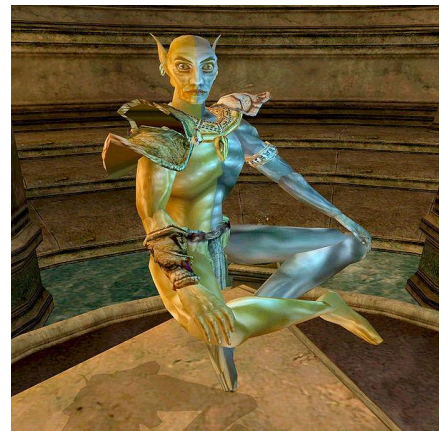
Unlike Almalexia and Sotha Sil, Vivec is strongly present in the narrative of *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, and out of the three Tribunal, he is the most prominent and the most popular among the Dunmer, said to represent “the spirit and duality of the Dunmer people” (*Lore: Vivec*. n.d.). Duality is indeed a key word in describing Vivec as this quality is reflected in both his physical appearance as well as his disposition and actions. Vivec is intersex, though the pronoun ‘he’ is used when referring to him, and he chooses to appear in a masculine form. His skin is divided in color; the left side of his body is golden in hue while the right side is greyish blue (see figure 3). Michael Kirkbride, the concept artist and the real-life author of *The Thirty-Six Lessons of Vivec*, has stated that Vivec was inspired by Ardhanarishvara, the androgynous form of the Hindu God Shiva (*Lore: Vivec*. n.d.) The dialogue the player can have with Vivec implies that he – unlike Almalexia – is content with the player character’s actions that will result in the loss of the Tribunal’s divine powers: “I have always worn my divinity lightly -- fundamentally, I am not at all a serious person -- and I will not miss it. [...] I will be quite content to be a mere mortal again, dedicated to my own amusements.” (*Morrowind: Vivec (god)*. n.d.).



**Figure 1: Almalexia in *The Elder Scrolls III: Tribunal*.**



**Figure 2: Sotha Sil in *The Elder Scrolls III: Tribunal*.**



**Figure 3: Vivec in *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*.**

### 2.3 *The Thirty-Six Lessons of Vivec*

*The Thirty-Six Lessons of Vivec* is an in-game book series that narrates the achievements of the Tribunal and the supposed birth and rise of Vivec as one of the Tribunal gods. *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*



explains that all the sermons within the books have been written by Vivec himself, and they are heavily self-referential metatexts. Despite the fact that *The Lessons* have been numbered, they do not appear in a linear order in the game: the player is able to find and read individual volumes in any sequence, or to ignore them completely. While the events in *The Lessons* are narrated chronologically, the aforementioned feature breaks this chronology unless the player specifically chooses to gather the thirty-six volumes in an organized manner. The practical function of *The Lessons* is that, upon reading, each volume raises a specific skill of the player character, such as athletics, speechcraft or alchemy.

The events described in *The Thirty-Six Lessons of Vivec* occur before *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, and they have been avidly discussed and debated by the fan community of *The Elder Scrolls* franchise. The prose of *The Lessons* is “very cryptic, [...] open to an incredible amount of speculation and conjecture” (*Lore: Vivec*. n.d.). It has been speculated whether the content of *The Lessons* is true or untrue, and to what extent Vivec’s narrative voice should be trusted. This dual nature of *The Lessons* can be said to reflect Vivec’s own dualism which forms the core of his identity. Furthermore, the purpose of *The Lessons* can be said to both solidify the Tribunal as the rightful gods of Morrowind and the Dunmer, and to provide a demonstration on how the Tribunal – especially Vivec – are above mortal imperfections, laws and limitations (*Lore: Vivec*. n.d.).

### **3 Theoretical and methodological framework**

The theoretical approaches which are applied in this thesis examine contemporary queer studies of video games, the practices of othering of the homosexual other, and the hegemony of institutionalized heteronormativity which affects the amount of implicit and explicit queer content in video games.

#### **3.1 Queer theory and queer game studies**

The word ‘queer’ has both literal and more abstract definitions, but in the context of contemporary usage it has gained most meanings through the LGBTQ community (Ruberg, 2017, p. 200). Queerness and queer lifestyles can be seen as defiant actions towards heteronormative society and practises that can manifest in various forms such as through sexuality and gender non-conformity (Ruberg, 2017, p.

200). Furthermore, queerness can allude to “a longing to live otherwise, a resistance to social structures, and an embrace of the strange” (Ruberg, 2017, p. 200). However, it should be mentioned that in the context of LGBTQ, ‘queer’ was first used as a derogatory and homophobic slur, but it was later reclaimed and transformed into an empowering identity by the LGBTQ community (Barry, 2009, p. 138). ‘Queer’ also functions as an umbrella term for existing LGBTQ identities (Ruberg, 2018, p. 546).

At its core, queer theory is committed to “difference as pragmatics [...] favouring hybridity, elision and discursivity” (Burrill, 2017, p. 25). Concepts such as heteronormativity and performativity of gender and identity constructions have helped legitimize queer theory “as a central [...] critical methodology in the understanding of identity, culture and the body” (Burrill, 2017, p. 25–26). The ‘queerness’ in queer theory can thus refer to practices that are not sexual, but which deviate from the established norm in different ways (Ruberg, 2017, p. 200). In video games, queer theory and queerness itself can be applied to, and discovered in, various elements of a game. It can be present in the characters, worlds, gameplay, storytelling and player communities or in other words, in different fractions of what make a whole (Mackling, 2017, p. 249). Mackling (2017) concludes that “instead of the question ‘Where is the queerness in games?’, we can ask, ‘Where is the queerness?’ and answer ‘In games!’” (p. 256). This statement is an encouragement to adopt more inclusive ways of reading.

Mackling’s (2017) approach to queerness in video games would indicate that everything in *The Elder Scrolls: Morrowind*, from design, code, gameplay and narrative, can be viewed as queer. While Mackling’s (2017) theory of queer game studies offers valuable insight for the topic of this thesis, a usage of another theoretical approach would also be appropriate because Mackling’s (2017) approach shifts from analysing the individual parts of a game in favour of analysing the video game as a whole. *Layered queerness*, or the methods of portrayal and inclusion of queer themes on various levels of a text, will provide a more systematic approach to *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* and the self-referential *The Thirty-Six Lessons of Vivec*. Furthermore, if according to Mackling (2017) video games regardless of genre are inherently queer, then as a result video games can lose their ‘queerness’: if everything is queer then nothing is queer, and the meaning of ‘being queer’ – in reference to social norms – paradoxically refers to adhering a new normality with no differing qualities within.

It should be acknowledged however, that reading a text through a 'queer lens', a practice that Mackling (2017) describes, can be interpreted as being a practice which purpose is to destabilize dominant heteronormativity in media. As a matter of fact, this thesis partakes in that practice by applying queer analysis to *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*. Hence, the rejection of queer lens and the different ways of reading it provides can be interpreted as being a method with which heteronormative culture attempts to protect itself by providing a counter-claim against LGBTQ texts and interpretations. In other words, as Ruberg (2017) remarks, when queer themes are explored in video games, the dominant heteronormative point of view can seek to defend its position by claiming that this practice “[pollutes] the hetero safe space of queer-free play with [...] ‘gay’ interpretations” (p. 199).

When queer representations in video games have been explored, the focus has been on the various forms of representation. In their quantitative analysis on the types of LGBTQ content in video games published between 1985-2015, Shaw and Friesem (2016) detail nine different categories for queer representation: characters, relationships/romance/sex, actions, locations, mentions, artifacts, traits, queer games/narratives, and homophobia/transphobia. To summarize, the majority of queer content in games is conveyed implicitly and separated from the identity of the player and the character they control (Shaw & Friesem, 2016). Queerness of non-playable male characters is portrayed more explicitly than that of non-playable female characters, and queerness in relation to gender identity is commonly represented with transsexual and transgender characters (Shaw & Friesem, 2016). In a continuative quantitative study which further analyses queer content in video games published between 1985-2005, it was discovered that gender non-conforming, genderfluid, nonbinary and intersex characters were often non-human creatures (Shaw et al., 2019).

### **3.2 Othering and the homosexual other**

Othering is a theme that is central to queer theory, as well as to the comparison and distinction of the binary opposites of heterosexual/homosexual hierarchy discussed by Diana Fuss (Barry, 2009, p. 138). Fuss argues that “the philosophical opposition between ‘heterosexual’ and ‘homosexual’ [...] has always been constructed on the foundations of another related opposition: “the couple ‘inside and ‘outside” (Fuss, 1991, p. 1). In practice, this opposition according to Fuss (1991) occurs when heterosexuality “defines itself in critical opposition to that which it is not: homosexuality” (p. 1). As a result, the conflict

between two binary opposites upholds “the structures of alienation, splitting, and identification which together produce the self and the other, a subject and an object, an unconscious and a conscious, an interiority and an exteriority” (Fuss, 1991, pp. 1–2). Lastly, the inside/outside and the heterosexual/homosexual oppositions have, in Fuss’s (1991) words, led to the production of “a specious distinction between a pure and natural heterosexual inside and an impure and unnatural homosexual outside” (p. 2).

Portraying heterosexuality as the norm has contributed to the othering of people not perceived to be withing this norm. The “heterosexual imaginary” (as cited in (Rothmann & Simmonds, 2015, p. 116) upholds the concept of heterosexuality as a normative or natural social and sexual relation whereas “those who do not conform to heteronormativity are ‘othered’ (Rothmann & Simmonds, 2015, p. 116). McIntosh (1968) further define the effect of othering as “a creation of a specialized, despised and punished role of homosexual’ that distinguishes between ‘permissible and forbidden behavior’” (as cited in Rothmann & Simmonds, 2015, p. 121). The othering of LGBTQ identities can also manifest as “negative other-presentation [which] involves those who are considered ‘others’ being presented as ‘inferior’ to one’s own group”, often through “the use of derogatory labels [...] or the negative stereotypical attributes assign[ed] to them” (Rothmann & Simmonds, 2015, p. 121). In *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, the Tribunal apply the practice of othering against their opposition in order to solidify their status as gods.

### **3.3 Implicit and explicit queerness and heteronormativity**

Tying the processes of othering and queer game studies together are the notions of heteronormativity as well as implicit and explicit queerness. Furthermore, heteronormativity does not only affect queer portrayals and representations, but it can also restrict “heterosexual identities which do not conform to familial, marital or reproductive norms” (Carroll, 2012, p. 1). As an “institution” (Carroll, 2012, p. 1), heteronormativity supports “binary logic by which ‘hetero-’ and ‘homosexual’ identities are produced” (Carroll, 2012, p. 2). Carroll (2012) notes that these binary structures are at the core of queer theory which aims to question the requirement “to identify/be identified as either male or female, either masculine or feminine and either heterosexual or homosexual” (p. 6). The heteronormative approach

of 'either/or' towards sexuality, sex and gender restricts queer identities and performances. On a deeper level, heteronormativity also affects processes outside of sexuality, as Jagose (as cited in Carroll, 2012) observes: "it is not simply that heterosexuality seems irreducible to the sex acts that it nevertheless privileges, but also that heterosexuality is naturalized through a range of practices and institutions that don't seem to be about sexuality at all" (p. 7). In relation to *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* and the Tribunal, Almalexia, Sotha Sil and Vivec uphold societal and religious structures which emphasize the importance of patriarchal traditions.

The portrayal of heterosexuality as the norm is frequent in video games, which, according to Krobová et al. (2015) "is neither a coincidence nor a random choice" (p. 2). Krobová et al. (2015) discuss how heterosexuality is commonly defined as the invisible norm which is accepted automatically. The effect of heteronormativity on video games with queer representation has resulted in "constant pressure to correspond to heteronormative patterns [and] conventions inherited from media narratives" (Krobová et al., 2015). However, creating a new genre of queer video games which are specifically aimed for queer audiences is not a viable, long-term solution according to Krobová et al. (2015) who argue that it "might result in their ghettoization" (p. 3). However, a pluralist approach to queer content – such as the addition of queer representation to mainstream video games along with games made specifically to queer audiences – could be an effective alternative. Nevertheless, as Krobová et al. (2015) discuss, dividing player communities is, in the end, an ineffective method to increase and improve queer representation.

When queer representation has been present, it has often occurred in an isolated context, separating the LGBTQ people from the larger community (Shaw et al., 2019). If a queer character appears in a video game, their presence has been treated as a curiosity, almost to a point of exoticism. Implicit and explicit representations of queer characters, while present, fall under this context of isolation (Shaw et al., 2019, p. 14). The majority of video games analysed by Shaw et al. (2019) had only one queer character who is separated from the mass of heterosexual characters in basis of sexual orientation. Moreover, queer representation in video games between 1985-2005, a time period Shaw and Friesem (2016) and Shaw et al. (2019) focus on in their studies, demonstrates how gay characters are almost always represented explicitly whereas other sexualities, such as bisexuality, are represented implicitly.

Gender-nonconformity, while present, often leaves out transgender, intersex and nonbinary characters while more stereotypical and offensive portrayals prevail (Shaw et al., 2019, p. 14) Overall, in the video games Shaw et al. (2019) studied, queerness in reference to sexual orientation is far more common than queerness in relation to gender identity (p. 15).

### **3.4 The application of chosen theoretical frameworks**

The discussion on the definition and application of the word 'queer' is relevant to the analysis of queer representation in *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* and *The Thirty-Six Lessons of Vivec*. Queerness in relation to sexual and gender identities as well as to actions that differ and oppose the norm which society has set both apply to these texts. Shaw and Friesem's (2016) nine categories of the ways in which queer content can manifest in video games will be used to identify the ways in which queer representation appears in *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* and *The Thirty-Six Lessons of Vivec*. In relation to this thesis, Barry's (2009), Fuss's (1991) and Rothmann and Simmonds's (2015) research on othering will be applied mainly in the analysis of the Tribunal and their Anticipations. Lastly, the analysis of the ways in which heteronormativity manifests in the practices of Almalexia, Sotha Sil and Vivec will reference Carroll's (2012) and Burrill's (2017) research.

## **4 Analysis - Presentation of the analysis and findings**

The presentation of the analysis is divided thematically into three sections. These sections examine and discuss how queer representation is presented in *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, how the dynamics of the practice of othering manifest in the lore of the Tribunal, and how heteronormative patterns exist and are maintained by the Tribunal. It is, however, to be acknowledged that queerness and queer identities and performances can also relate to non-sexual deeds, as Ruberg (2017) notes. Leaving the analysis centered on the portrayal of sexual orientations through the characters of Almalexia, Sotha Sil and Vivec would not take into account the queer themes that exist beneath the surface-level interpretations of *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* and *The Thirty-Six Lessons of Vivec*.

#### 4.1 Queer representation in *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*: An overview

*The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* includes queer representation on two levels which differ from each other significantly. The queerness of the Tribunal in the game narrative and what the player directly experiences is inherently implicit, if not even invisible. *The Thirty-Six Lessons of Vivec* on the other hand contain explicit descriptions of the queerness of Almalexia, Sotha Sil and Vivec. *The Lessons* are also the only source which explicitly state that Vivec is intersex. Without this acquired knowledge from *The Lessons*, Vivec's gender could be interpreted to be male since his physical appearance is masculine (see figure 3) and the pronoun 'he' is used when referred to him. When Shaw et al's. (2019) notion of queer invisibility as an "indirect form of representational oppression" (p. 11) is applied to *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* to its full extent, the lack of direct, explicit and noticeable confirmation of Vivec's gender is a feature which leaves the queer representation in *Morrowind* inherently implicit. However, the persistence of the heteronormative concept of 'either/or' in this interpretation goes against the core purpose of queer theory, which is to question and criticize the binary concepts of gender and sexuality.

It can also be debated whether *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* adheres to, or differs from, the trend of associating non-humanness with intersex, nonbinary and gender-nonconforming characters. In a more abstract sense, Almalexia, Sotha Sil and Vivec are not, in fact, humanoid creatures despite their physical appearances. They are gods, beings with divine power and status, elevated from the constraints of mortality. They are not restricted in the same ways the ordinary people of Morrowind are, and as an extension, their sexual and gender performances are not openly scrutinized. For instance, the Dunmer people unconsciously accept "the notion of darker, hidden currents beneath Vivec's benevolent aspects" (*Lore: Vivec*. n.d.).

The role of queer characters as villains or monsters – a historical trend in LGBTQ media representation according to Benshoff and Griffin (2006) and Russo (1987) (as cited in Shaw et al., 2019) – both applies and does not apply to *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*. Vivec, a pansexual and intersex character, is on the side of the player character, directly assisting them on their quest to save Morrowind. However, in the *Tribunal* expansion that continues the story of the player character and introduces the other two Tribunals, it is Almalexia who is in the villainous, antagonistic role of "an aging god [drifting] into madness" (*Tribunal: Tribunal*. n.d.). Again, defining Vivec and Almalexia as queer characters is possible

only through *The Thirty-Six Lessons of Vivec* as the direct narration and gameplay of *Morrowind* do not explicitly convey or discuss their sexual and gender identities. Therefore, on a surface level, *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* does not portray queer characters in stereotypical villain roles.

It is to be discussed whether the queer representation in *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* is implicit or explicit. Shaw and Friesem (2016) do not further discuss the application of the definitions of implicit and explicit representations: “explicit (clearly and easily read) or implicit (having signifiers of LGBTQ identities but not explicitly stated as such)” (p. 3). Hence, to state that *Morrowind* utilizes implicit or explicit representation is debatable. For instance, from the point of view of a player experience, Vivec’s intersexuality is explicitly stated in *The Thirty-Six Lessons of Vivec*, but on the other hand, these artifacts can be entirely ignored by the player. Additionally, Vivec himself does not comment on his gender identity when engaged in dialogue. It falls upon the player to actively seek additional information. Thus, it can be stated that queer content in *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* is both implicit and layered, existing in the in-depth content of the game which can be discovered by the player, or be left untouched.

#### **4.1.1 Depictions of the sexual and gender identities of the Tribunal in *The Thirty-Six Lessons of Vivec***

One of the most evident examples of the sexual and gender identities and performances portrayed through the characters of Almalexia, Sotha Sil and Vivec is in twelfth sermon of *The Thirty-Six Lessons of Vivec*:

Vivec wandered into the Mourning Hold and found that Ayem was with a pair of lovers. Seht had divided himself again. Vivec then leapt through into their likenesses to observe, but he gained no secrets that he did not already know. He left a few of his own behind to make the journey worthwhile. (*36 Lessons of Vivec*. n.d.)

Two possible readings can be made from this segment, both of which address the identities of Almalexia’s lovers. The first reading interprets the “pair of lovers” as characters who are not part of the Tribunal but who are involved in sexual activities with Almalexia. Sotha Sil dividing himself can be seen as its own action which occurs outside of sex, inherently separating him from Almalexia, Vivec and the unidentified lovers. However, the second reading gives meaning to the separate sentence which



identifies Sotha Sil's divided parts as the lovers – an interpretation that would suggest the Tribunal are in a figuratively incestuous sexual relationship. While Almalexia, Sotha Sil and Vivec are not blood-related, they do refer to each other as siblings in *The Lessons* as well as in-game dialogue in various instances. For example, in in-game dialogue discussing the other two Tribunal, Vivec calls Sotha Sil “my brother Sotha Sil” (*Morrowind: Vivec (god)*. n.d.). Lastly, in the self-referential *Lessons*, Vivec elaborates how Sotha Sil is “[t]he Father”, Almalexia is “[t]he Mother” and he himself is “[t]he Son” (*36 Lessons of Vivec*. n.d.).

To classify the sexual orientation of Almalexia and Sotha Sil as queer might be accurate, given the unspecified genders of the two lovers of the first reading. Furthermore, the second reading does not account for the genders of Sotha Sil's divided parts. Vivec's involvement in the quoted scene contributes to the queerness of the two Tribunals. While on the surface level of *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* Almalexia appears heterosexual, *The Lessons* expand on her sexual identity and its fluidity. Her gender identity is that of a woman, and her physical appearance corresponds to this identity (see figure 1). Vivec addressing Almalexia as “[t]he Mother” (*36 Lessons of Vivec*. n.d.) as well as Almalexia's marriage to “her husband-state [a male character ruling Morrowind], a flickering image that was channeled to her ever-changing female need” (*36 Lessons of Vivec*. n.d.) reinforce Almalexia's status as a correspondent to “heteronormative patterns [and] conventions” (Krobová et al., 2015).

As the amount of content on Sotha Sil is the scarcest of the Tribunal, elaboration on his sexual and gender identities is not as extensive as Almalexia's or Vivec's. However, an argument can be made about his queer identity which manifests as his intent to transform his body from organic to mechanic (see figure 2). In the thirteenth sermon of *The Lessons*, it is elaborated how “Seht [is] the mechanism that allows the transformation of the world” (*36 Lessons of Vivec*. n.d.). The end result of the mentioned transformation is not detailed further, but the quote suggests that Sotha Sil represents a transition to technology and the erasure of both sexuality and gender. Him dividing himself to create new beings can be said to be a reference to asexual reproduction, of the creation of new life from oneself. From the point of view of queer analysis, Sotha Sil is a character who appears to resist heteronormativity.

Almalexia, Sotha Sil and Vivec represent life and its extreme ends: “God hath three keys; of birth, of machines, and of the worlds between [...] [t]he splendor of stars is Ayem's domain. The selfishness of

the sea is Seht's. I [Vivec] rule the middle air" (*36 Lessons of Vivec*. n.d.). The Tribunal as one entity contains the cycle of life itself, and it can be interpreted as a metaphor for the advancement of life towards death and an eventual transition towards a 'non-existence' portrayed by machines and technology, which counteracts and nullifies the cycle by removing birth and death completely. A queer reading of Almalexia, Sotha Sil and Vivec as representations of the varying stages of life cycle and the myriads of identities also brings forth the interpretation of the motherly, feminine Almalexia as 'the norm' of heteronormativity, the machine-like Sotha Sil as 'the nothing' of gender and sexuality, and the intersex, pansexual Vivec as 'the everything' of all identities.

#### **4.1.2 Closer examination of Vivec's sexual and gender performances**

As Vivec is the most represented character throughout *The Thirty-Six Lessons of Vivec*, descriptions of his sexual and gender performances are plentiful. These scenes detail how Vivec identifies himself, how he utilizes his sexuality to grow in power, and how he views love and romance. When Vivec appeared from an egg, he "became the union of male and female, the magic hermaphrodite, the martial axiom, the sex-death of language and unique in all the middle world" (*36 Lessons of Vivec*. n.d.). After achieving a new level of divine power "Vivec had what he needed from the Daedroth and so married him that day" (*36 Lessons of Vivec*. n.d.) and that later on "Vivec, who had a grain of Ayem's mercy, set about to teach Molag Bal in the ways of belly-magic. They took their spears out and compared them. Vivec bit new words onto the King of Rape's so that it might give more than ruin to the uninitiated" (*36 Lessons of Vivec*. n.d.). In the very first of the sermons Vivec declares that "love is under [his] will only" (*36 Lessons of Vivec*. n.d.) and that "if the love of the people of this city for [him] ever disappear, so shall the power that holds back their destruction." (*36 Lessons of Vivec*. n.d.).

*The Thirty-Six Lessons of Vivec* detail how Vivec creates a unique weapon which becomes a symbol of his divinity. This spear, known as Muatra (an anagram of 'trauma') came to be "from a secret [Vivec] had bitten off from the King of Rape" (*36 Lessons of Vivec*. n.d.) after procreating with him. Another name given to Muatra is "Milk Taker" since it has the power to turn anyone it strikes "barren and withered" (*36 Lessons of Vivec*. n.d.). Later on, Vivec uses Muatra to slay the monsters he himself gave birth to (*36 Lessons of Vivec*. n.d.). From the context of the creation of Muatra – sex between Vivec and the King of Rape and Vivec biting off the secret from the King of Rape's 'spear' – it is to be understood

that Muatra is a euphemism for Vivec's penis, and the "milk" in reference to "Milk Taker" alludes to sperm.

In terms of Shaw and Friesem's (2016) nine categories of queer content in video games, Muatra is an artifact and a significant part of Vivec and his identity. Taking into consideration the dual nature of the love Vivec expresses towards his worshippers, Muatra is the embodiment of his aggression and authority, and while wielding it, Vivec himself becomes "the martial axiom [and] the sex-death" (*36 Lessons of Vivec*. n.d.). Muatra is sexualized as a euphemism for Vivec's manhood, as well as a symbol for his masculinity. The circumstances of its creation myth – rape, trauma and death – provoke a question as to why Vivec chooses to wield it. Perhaps the spear is a representation of his love, which, the *Lessons* detail, is "shaped like a spear" (*36 Lessons of Vivec*. n.d.). While Vivec fronts a disposition of a caring and benevolent warrior-poet, the existence of Muatra right by his side is a reminder that he is also capable of acts of violence and domination. In other words, Muatra is an expression of power and control over others. Rape as a method of control also occurs when Vivec describes his own actions as "God's holy rape-erasure of wet death" (*36 Lessons of Vivec*. n.d.). This description includes Vivec's dual aspects of godly righteousness ("God's holy") and the violence of Muatra ("rape-erasure") wielded and controlled by him.

## **4.2 Themes of othering in the practices of the Tribunal**

The practice and themes of othering are mostly present in the background lore of the Tribunal, but it is also detectable in the subtext of the storyline of *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*. Specifically, the player character themselves is othered in the beginning, and only through following the main questline and becoming the hero Nerevarine are they fully accepted by the Dunmer people. With regards to the Tribunal and the processes of othering Almalexia, Sotha Sil and Vivec practice, othering is used as a method of maintaining control.

### **4.2.1 The Tribunal lore of the othered Anticipations**

As the player learns more about the Tribunal by reading in-game texts, it is revealed that before the formation of the Tribunal by Almalexia, Sotha Sil and Vivec, the Dunmer people worshipped entities known as *Daedra*. Three of these Daedra – the Daedric princes Azura, Boethiah and Mephala – were

revered by the Dunmer and it was believed that these three were the creators of the Dunmer race. Azura is the Daedric prince of dawn and dusk, Boethiah of conspiracy and revolution, and Mephala of lies, sex, secrets and assassination. When Almalexia, Sotha Sil and Vivec established themselves as the God-Kings of Morrowind, Azura, Boethiah and Mephala were presented to have been 'The Anticipations' of the Tribunal. Those who still worshipped the three Daedric princes were persecuted and ostracized from the Dunmer society.

The process of othering practiced by the Tribunal is the most evident towards the Anticipations. After ascending to godhood, Vivec, Almalexia and Sotha Sil established a new form of worship which sought to demote the formerly worshipped Daedra into less powerful and less relevant beings:

The Daedra are powerful ancestor spirits, similar in form and substance to the Tribunal (Blessed Be Their Holy Names), but weaker in power, and more arbitrary and removed from the affairs of mortals. [...] The Three Good Daedra, Boethiah, Azura and Mephala, recognised the Divinity of the Triune Ancestors (Blessed Be Their Holy Names) [...] The Rebel Daedra [...] refused to swear fealty to the Tribunal (Blessed Be Their Holy Names) and their worshippers were cast out. [The Tribunal] bade the Daedra to give proper veneration and obedience (*The Anticipations*. n.d.)

However, on a deeper level, the othering of the Anticipations has another function, which is to represent the more controversial qualities and attributes of Almalexia, Sotha Sil and Vivec. The Anticipations can be interpreted to be the binary opposites to the Tribunal, the "impure and unnatural outside" (Fuss, 1991, p. 2) which has been ostracized and subverted in favour of the "pure and natural inside" (Fuss, 1991, p. 2). For example, where Vivec is seen by the Dunmer people as a benevolent protector and a poet, his Anticipation Mephala is regarded as a creature of lies, sex, murder and secrets, but her existence is still unconsciously accepted (*Lore: Vivec*. n.d.). Nevertheless, Mephala's existence is deemed separate from Vivec despite Mephala being his Anticipation.

Binary oppositions, as discussed by Fuss (1991), also manifest in the genders of the Anticipations. While Daedra are able to portray themselves as any gender – or to choose to lack gender entirely – Boethiah and Azura are portrayed as opposite genders to Almalexia and Sotha Sil: "Boethiah is the Anticipation

of Almalexia, but male to her female [...] Azura is the Anticipation of Sotha Sil, but female to his male” (*The Anticipations*. n.d.). Together, the pairs Almalexia/Boethiah and Sotha Sil/Azura form heterosexual wholes. The pairing of Mephala and Vivec can be interpreted as an exception as both Mephala and Vivec are described to be intersex (*Lore: Vivec*. n.d.; *Mephala*. n.d.). However, as the intersex identities of Mephala and Vivec are made implicit in *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, the explicit portrayal of their genders maintains the impression of another heterosexual pairing. Additionally, throughout dialogue, they are assigned with genders that align with their physical appearances, of *he* and *she*.

When the othering of the Anticipations and the simultaneous forming of heterosexual pairs with the Tribunal are taken into account, the relationship between the two factions becomes complex. If Fuss’ s (1991) and Rothmann and Simmonds’s (2015) approaches are considered in the context of the Tribunal and the Anticipations, the theory of othering could be re-examined and re-applied. Having the queered othered form heterosexual, “natural” (Fuss, 1991) pairings with Vivec, Almalexia and Sotha Sil appears counterproductive. Perhaps, then, the underlying reason for the Tribunal to associate themselves with the othered Anticipations is rooted in power relations more than in queer themes. To give recognition to the formerly worshipped Azura, Mephala and Boethiah effectively assisted the Tribunal in establishing their godhood and gaining the devotion of the Dunmer people. But then again, the heterosexual pairings do adhere with the notion of heteronormativity.

#### **4.2.2 Othering of the Anticipations in *The Thirty-Six Lessons of Vivec***

In *The Thirty-Six Lessons of Vivec*, the Anticipations are portrayed as integral parts of the identities of the Tribunal, but the theme of othering still prevails in the overall narrative. Nevertheless, the relationship between the Anticipations and the Tribunal appears more neutral, and the Anticipations are represented to be one with Almalexia, Sotha Sil and Vivec. The first sermon describes how “Ayem came first to the village of the netchimen, and her shadow was that of Boethiah” (*36 Lessons of Vivec*. n.d.) while sermon eight states that “Seht [...] is Azura” (*36 Lessons of Vivec*. n.d.). However, the description of Boethiah as Almalexia’s shadow suggests that the inside/outside dichotomy is still present in the narrative to an effect which complies with the in-game depiction of the Anticipations as embodiments of the more controversial aspects of the Tribunal.

*The Lessons* include Mephala as a crucial part of Vivec's creation myth, narrating how "[Vivec] joined with the Daedroth and took its former secrets, leaving a few behind to keep the web of the world from disentangling" (*36 Lessons of Vivec*. n.d.). Yet, despite her role as an aid for Vivec being born, Mephala is then cast aside when Vivec becomes a god. From this point onwards, Mephala and Vivec become separate beings, and Mephala's influence is lessened into references of "codes of Mephala" (*36 Lessons of Vivec*. n.d.) in various instances in the events of *The Lessons*. Mephala's absence after the birth of Vivec can also be interpreted being a consequence of Vivec surpassing Mephala. The lack of appearance of the Anticipations in *The Lessons* in general might be a narrative strategy to other Azura, Boethiah and Mephala.

### **4.3 Heteronormativity and the hegemony of heterosexuality**

In *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, the queerness of the Tribunal is muted and made invisible on the surface level, and only through a closer reading and exploration of the in-game texts can the player discover it. However, the layered queerness of Almalexia, Sotha Sil and Vivec has yet another layer to it, a layer which proves out to be based on heterosexual hegemony and heteronormativity. The Anticipations, while ostracized by the Tribunal ascension, are still present in the lore of Almalexia, Sotha Sil and Vivec, with whom they form heterosexual pairings. Almalexia, the sole woman of the Tribunal, is depicted as motherly and nurturing, akin to heteronormative female roles. Vivec's spear Muatra is both a euphemism for his penis as well as a weapon, and an artifact which represents masculinity and aggression.

#### **4.3.1 *The Tribunal as enforcers of institutionalized heteronormativity***

The practices of the Tribunal – their methods of maintaining their positions as gods and of mitigating resistance – form an institution which, in the light of Carroll's (2012) and Burrill's (2017) research, is similar, if not identical, to the very same institutionalized, binary heteronormativity that queer theory criticizes. Queerness as "a resistance to heteronormative social structures" (Ruberg & Shaw, 2017, p. 200) is overtly prohibited in the teaching and practices of the Tribunal Temple, and with Vivec's influence, his worshippers actively suppress and persecute individuals and groups who do not adhere

to the social norm the Temple upholds (*Lore: Vivec*. n.d.). Vivec's teachings, at their core, convey hegemonic practices of patriarchal authority and the importance of obeying tradition:

"Your fourfold duties are to: Faith, Family, Masters, and all that is good. Perform holy quests and bring luster to the Temple. Never transgress against your brothers or sisters, and never dishonor your house or your ancestors. Serve and protect the poor and weak, and honor your elders and clan" (*Lore: Vivec*. n.d.).

The player's role as the Nerevarine is an opposition towards the Tribunal, but as the player follows the questline of *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, Vivec becomes an ally instead of an antagonist. However, the motivation for Vivec to support the player can be argued to be based on his need as an individual in addition to the need to save Morrowind: "Why did I try to kill you? Because you threatened the faith of my followers [...] Now circumstances are altered. I need you, and you need me" (*Morrowind: Vivec (god)*. n.d.). Vivec does not inherently support the player on the basis of good will, but on the basis of self-preservation.

Queerness in relation to social resistance would thus imply that the player and the character they create and control is in fact the queer force of *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*. Through the player's actions the Tribunal lose their divine power and the legitimacy of the Tribunal Temple is brought into question. The othered Anticipations and their ostracized followers gain back their positions in the Dunmer society. In the *Tribunal* expansion, the player prevents the maddened Almalexia from establishing a totalitarian rule by killing her. *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* also allows the player to kill Vivec, the last surviving member of the Tribunal. Additionally, one of the side questlines in *Morrowind* has the player join the Tribunal Temple and rise through its ranks to become the "Patriarch" (*Morrowind: Tribunal Temple*. n.d.) of the organization. However, despite achieving the highest rank in the Temple faction, the player is unable to make any concrete changes to it or dismantle it. It is unclear whether this limitation stems from the game design itself or whether it is a mechanic included purposefully.

As Jagose argues (as cited in Carroll, 2012, p. 7), institutions and practices are capable of naturalizing heterosexuality. The type of institution Vivec has established in *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* indeed does naturalize a hierarchical system based on traditional patriarchal values of following traditions and

respecting the authority of elders without question. The institution of worship Almalexia maintains in the *Tribunal* expansion is strict and cruel, and her concern over losing her image in their eyes has caused her to punish her people with ash storms and terror (*Tribunal: Almalexia*. n.d.). The persecution Vivec's institution practices towards those who do not conform to their teachings is, according to Vivec, "[j]ust one of the standard tools of statecraft" (*Morrowind: Vivec (god)*. n.d.). In conclusion, even though Almalexia and Vivec are queer characters in theory, their actions and the institutions they have created still adhere to the binary notions of heteronormative, hegemonic control. The lives of the Dunmer people are centred around the worship and service of the Tribunal, and those who criticize these practices are ostracized.

As an exception, Sotha Sil has removed himself from the world and distanced himself from the other two Tribunals. During the events of *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* it is to be understood that he is dedicated to creating a new world in his Clockwork City where "he reshapes life, and some say the very world, into an image he finds pleasing" (*Tribunal: Almalexia*. n.d.). Furthermore, according to Almalexia, Sotha Sil "lives in his own way, as he always has" (*Tribunal: Almalexia*. n.d.). While these details about Sotha Sil are not discussed further, there is a possibility of analyzing them through a queer lens. Unlike Almalexia and Vivec, Sotha Sil does not seek to actively maintain institutionalized forms of heteronormativity. From the context of his technocentric ideals, it could be hypothesized that the world he is creating might be free from restrictions of sex and gender, and of the structures of the life cycle the Tribunal represent as a whole.

#### **4.3.2 *The Thirty-Six Lessons of Vivec as a method of enforcement of heteronormative control***

In the end, the covert purpose of *The Thirty-Six Lessons of Vivec* is to strengthen and solidify the Tribunal's rise to divinity and their right to rule as God-Kings of Morrowind (*Lore: Vivec*. n.d.). The performances of which Vivec writes in *The Lessons* – through the interpretation of heteronormative control detailed by Carroll (2012) and Burrill (2017) – are methods which purpose is to separate the Tribunal from mortals and to demonstrate that they are justified to rule over the land of Morrowind. For instance, the triumph of Vivec against the King of Rape, the creation of Muatra which has the power to steal the fertility of its victims, the reduction of the formerly worshipped Anticipations into othered identities, and the divine descriptions of "the Face-Snaked Queen" Almalexia, "the Clockwork King"



Sotha Sil and “the Magic Hermaphrodite” Vivec as “the Mother, the Father, and the Son” (*36 Lessons of Vivec*. n.d.) are prime examples of the ways in which the Tribunal are portrayed as superior to mortals and formerly worshipped gods alike.

Almalexia, Sotha Sil and Vivec use queer performances to their advantage in order to mystify and justify their own actions and identities as gods, an aspect which is apparent in the sixth sermon where Vivec describes himself as “glorious and sympathetic, without borders, utmost in the perfections of this world and the others, sword and symbol, pale like gold” (*36 Lessons of Vivec*. n.d.). This description displays Vivec as a perfect, omnipotent being while excluding his more aggressive, oppressive and dominant qualities that manifest in his actions outside of *The Lessons*. The descriptions of Almalexia in *The Lessons* as a motherly figure as well as “the Face-Snaked Queen of the Three in One [who embodies] the meanings of the stars” (*36 Lessons of Vivec*. n.d.) is a stark contrast to Almalexia the player encounters in *The Elder Scrolls III: Tribunal* expansion where her benevolent side is thoroughly absent. Lastly, the murder of Sotha Sil in the hands of Almalexia directly contradicts the close familial relationship between the Tribunal that *The Thirty-Six Lessons of Vivec* has established.

In the thirty-fifth sermon, Vivec further states how the Tribunal Temple is a “dogma complemented by the influence of the untrustworthy sea and the governance of the stars, dominated at the center by the sword, which is nothing without a victim to cleave unto” (*36 Lessons of Vivec*. n.d.), reinforcing the concept of the Tribunal as the sole creators of the heteronormative, hegemonic institution of faith. The “untrustworthy sea” symbolizes Sotha Sil, the “governance of the stars” refers to Almalexia, and “the sword” is Vivec (*36 Lessons of Vivec*. n.d.). In other words, the Temple created and controlled by the Tribunal is portrayed as an entity which can – and will – “cleave” its opposition in order to strengthen the authoritative position of Vivec who “is nothing without a victim”. It is to be understood that in order for the Tribunal to have meaning, they require an opposing force which they can then diminish as a display of godly might.

## 5 Conclusion

Queer representation in *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* occurs through layered queerness. At a first glance, the player experience of *Morrowind* does not include queer representation, but a closer examination reveals that the queer themes of *Morrowind* can be discovered in in-game artifacts which are the volumes of a book series *The Thirty-Six Lessons of Vivec*. These texts expand on the characters of the Tribunal Almalexia, Sotha Sil and Vivec. Through *The Thirty-Six Lessons of Vivec*, the implicit representation of queer characters becomes explicit; for example, Vivec's intersexuality is not explicitly stated in *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, and his physical appearance as well the pronoun 'he' which is used when referring to him, cause his gender identity to remain invisible. However, it is to be stated that the discovery of queer representation in *Morrowind* solely depends on the choice of the player to actually interact with and read *The Thirty-Six Lessons of Vivec*.

Overall, as queer characters, Almalexia, Sotha Sil and Vivec both adhere to, and differ from, the historical trend of video games portraying queer characters as either villains or non-human creatures. Yet it should be acknowledged that the definitions of both non-humanness and antagonistic roles themselves are not black-and-white when applied to the Tribunal. While Almalexia, Sotha Sil and Vivec are humanoid creatures, they are also god-like beings who are not restricted by mortal limits. The value and moral systems the Tribunal uphold are not queer, however, and these values can add to the antagonistic nature of the Tribunal. Additionally, while Vivec is on the side of the player, his former actions against the player character – persecution of individuals and groups who do not accept the teachings of the Tribunal for example – demonstrate antagonistic behaviour.

Further examination of the actions of the Tribunal reveals the underlying heteronormativity beneath their queer performances. At its core, the institution of faith Almalexia and Vivec have established reflects heterosexual hegemony which emphasizes the importance of family, patriarchal hierarchy, and subservience to one's masters. The player as the true queer force in *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, while a valid interpretation, falls short as the player is unable to change the institution itself despite becoming its highest-ranking member if chosen to do so. Sotha Sil as an exception to the institutionalized heteronormativity remains as the sole queer character among the Tribunal. The

process of the new world he is building is however prevented by Almalexia who murders Sotha Sil in the *Tribunal* expansion, which is an act that can be interpreted as queerness being erased by heteronormativity.

Themes of using queer performances in order to gain control and authority comes across the clearest in *The Thirty-Six Lessons of Vivec*. The scenes of Vivec procreating with the King of Rape, creating Muatru from his own penis and using it to banish his monstrous children, Sotha Sil dividing himself into other beings, as well as Almalexia's identification with stars further exemplify the process of the Tribunal elevating themselves into godly beings. Through the prose of *The Thirty-Six Lessons of Vivec*, Almalexia, Sotha Sil and Vivec convey their ability to subdue the formerly worshipped Anticipations into lesser beings. These beings are then forced into the roles of othered negative manifestations of the aspects of which the Tribunal do not wish to take ownership. The othered Anticipations forming heterosexual pairs with the Tribunal also enforces the heteronormative influence behind Almalexia, Sotha Sil and Vivec.

In conclusion, the queer content in *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* and *The Thirty-Six Lessons of Vivec* is layered, and while Almalexia, Sotha Sil and Vivec are queer characters, their practices – mainly Almalexia's and Vivec's – still uphold the hegemony of heterosexuality. The limitations of this study concern with the fact that *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* and *The Thirty-Six Lessons of Vivec* are not the only texts where the Tribunal appear. In order to focus the analysis on only these two texts resulted in the exclusion of multitude of queer content about the Tribunal, as well as information on the individual characters, especially Sotha Sil. Further study of queer themes that are present in *The Elder Scrolls* franchise could provide a deeper understanding of queer representation in role-playing games, as well as demonstrate how queerness in video games can be layered and nuanced. Experiencing and exploring video games through a queer lens can reveal their underlying heteronormativity and encourage creating new methods of representation and inclusion of queer identities and performances.

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