

Constructing Civilizations: A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of Fictional Languages in *Chants of Sennaar*

Keywords

Fictional languages; Multimodal Discourse Analysis; Critical Discourse Analysis; In-game Text Analysis

Chants of Sennaar (Rundisc 2023) tasks players with decoding five fictional languages, each associated with a distinct cultural group: the Devotees, Warriors, Bards, Alchemists, and Anchorites, progressively revealing unique cultural systems and intercivilizational conflicts through this process (Couture 2024). While recent scholarship has examined its puzzle-solving design, cultural symbolism, and pedagogical value (Cheng and Hao 2025; Lilie and Donat 2024; Loukkola 2025; McKeown 2025), few studies integrate linguistic analysis with the game's multimodal design as a means of cultural construction. Addressing this gap, this study examines how these five fictional languages construct the game's civilizations through cross-modal meaning-making, guided by two questions: a) How are the meanings of fictional languages conveyed through cross-modal cues? b) How do these fictional languages construct and naturalize ideological positions and power relations within the game's fictional cultures?

Existing literature identifies two major relationships between fictional language and civilization: external world-building and internal constructions of social meaning, identity, and hierarchy. In terms of world-building, created languages function as characterization: their sound, visual form, grammar, vocabulary, and partial translations help readers infer the aesthetics and worldview of their speakers (Cheyne 2008; Wolf 2014). These linguistic features can also generate fictional or fan-based communities, encouraging further engagement with the language as a means of accessing the world it represents (Barnes and Van Heerden 2006; Cheyne 2008; Schreyer 2021). Internally, language shapes what a culture can think, classify, and express through naming and semantics; the concepts included or excluded from a vocabulary determine what can be articulated within that language (Cheyne 2008; Wolf 2014). Furthermore, language can also serve as an emblem of cultural difference and power: when access to a language is restricted to particular groups, it can reinforce class boundaries and social control (Barnes and Van Heerden 2006; Cheyne 2008; Wolf 2014). However, existing studies also reveal that the role of created language in specific fictional contexts remains underexplored (Barnes and Van Heerden 2006; Cheyne 2008; Schreyer 2021). Accordingly, this study examines the relationship between fictional language and civilization both externally and internally, moving from how linguistic form produces literal and semantic meaning to how language shapes concepts, power relations, and communities.

Given this context, the study adopts Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) as its methodological framework (Machin and Mayr 2023). Digital environments, as Murray (1997) observes, possess procedural, participatory, spatial, and encyclopedic

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affordances that simultaneously enable immersive world-building and interactivity, making MCDA a particularly suitable methodology for analyzing *Chants of Sennaar*. Treating all communication as a set of semiotic choices that can reveal embedded ideologies and power relations, MCDA extends Fairclough's (2010) three-dimensional model of text, discursive practice, and social practice to encompass multimodal meaning-making resources beyond written language, attending to how different semiotic modes work together to "perpetuate, legitimize, or 'naturalist' actions, processes, or forms of social relations that may create inequality or injustice in the world" (Machin and Mayr 2023, 28).

Inspired by Machin and Mayr (2023, 44–45), we conduct a three-level analysis: at the micro level, the semiotic choices embedded in fictional language signs and their multimodal design; at the meso level, the decoding conventions and gameplay practices through which meaning is constructed; and at the macro level, the ideological structures and power relations reproduced through the game's fictional civilizations. The Bardic system serves as the representative case, drawn from a complete gameplay video (NeatPick 2023, at 1:22:08–1:58:44). Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of multimodal resources co-occurring with the slave figure across four analytical domains in the Bardic system: visual, verbal, procedural, and cultural.

The figure illustrates this design logic in action. Three semiotic modes are deliberately put together: an icon, a decoded warrior script (lower line: The Chosen One Pass; Warriors Don't Pass), and an undeciphered Bardic inscription (upper line). The warrior figure is placed as a visual anchor, establishing an ideational concurrence between the linguistic sign and its visual motif (Unsworth 2008). The Bardic inscription is then positioned to mirror the warrior script in position, length, and structure, systematically inviting cross-script comparison (Kress and van Leeuwen 2021). Through this analogy, the repeated lexical item in the upper line 止 is mapped onto its decoded counterpart 止 below, creating the inference that it carries the meaning "go/pass."



Figure 2: A sign prohibiting warriors from entry

Moving beyond lexical meaning, the multimodal design in this game also embeds discursive strategies to construct cultural ideation and power. Two practices we currently observe are labeling and metaphors.

Labels are enacted when players learn to recognize and rely on seemingly self-evident identity markers in order to progress. At the linguistic level, relational and possessive constructions such as *Weapons, warriors have* and *Idiots, warriors are!* attribute fixed characteristics to social groups, naturalizing roles as inherent properties and functioning as disguised symbolic attribution (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014). Repeated exposure to these patterns conceptually aligns each civilization with distinct value domains: Bards with beauty, Warriors with violence, and slaves with intellectual inferiority. At the visual level, these conceptual attributes become more concrete through character appearance, action, and setting, allowing players to strengthen the perceived validity of each label. At the procedural level, designers further consolidate labeling by restricting semantic ambiguity (Couture 2024): the notebook permits only one operationally successful interpretation, and subsequent interactions reproduce established labels automatically, persuading players to treat them as functionally reliable knowledge (Bogost 2007).

A second discursive mechanism identified is orientational metaphors, where verticality is mapped onto social value and hierarchy (Lakoff and Johnson 2003). At the linguistic level, Bardic discourse constructs elevation as achieved completeness and upward aspiration as foolishness, with utterances such as *beauty, I found* and *idiot, ascending is!* naturalizing the existing social order as self-sufficient and legitimate. However, this linguistic framing is placed in tension with the game's visual and spatial design (Unsworth 2008), where elevation materially encodes dominance: Bards occupy colorful, refined upper spaces while slaves and Warriors inhabit dull, oppressive lower levels performing labor and protective functions (see Figure 3). Crucially, the exposure of such conceptual metaphors is enacted largely through players' situated engagement with the rules (Sicart 2011). Procedural progression requires players to descend into lower levels and participate in labor-oriented gameplay, while exploratory scenes, such as walls bearing the inscription to *be free, we want*, reintroduce suppressed aspirations that unsettle the dominant metaphor. Through this enforced engagement where play as exploration and play as resistance coexist, gameplay recontextualizes verticality as something sustained through unequal distributions of effort (Fairclough 2010; Sicart 2011).



Figure 3: Setting differences between the upper and lower level

So far, this study sets out to examine how language constructs cultural ideology in *Chants of Sennaar*, and how such constructions are shaped by the affordances of the game medium. The findings suggest that ideology in the game operates through two interrelated but distinct processes, informed by both Bogost (2007) and Sicart (2011):

procedural persuasion through labeling, and procedural contestation through metaphor. Additionally, further examination of community discourse indicates that players first internalized ideology through play, and later rearticulated, challenged, or resisted through reflection. Meaning-making thus continues beyond the game space, revealing how procedure and play co-produce interpretation over time (Stang 2019; Wardrip-Fruin et al. 2009).

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