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The Norse Myth in Video Games: A Controversial Approach

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Abstract

The present study aims to address the myth reconstruction and adaptation in video games through an initial study of Medievalism and Neomedievalism, following an analysis of the issues with adaptations over the years. I have conducted a case study of the game *God of War (2018)*. To gather data for the case study, I have examined several works related to the evolution of storytelling and literary adaptation to get a better understanding of the setting and myths reflected in the game.

Analyzing the collected data, I availed myself of many theories and ideas such as Kellyann Fitzpatrick's Neomedievalist theory, that includes an exhaustive comparison of the medieval myth with various recent adaptations, along with society and lifestyle from that period. Other functional sources have been *Prose Edda* by Snorri Sturlson and *The Poetic Edda* by Lee M. Hollander, texts that offered me a wider view of the faithfulness of each myth and its details. It has been demonstrated how *God of War (2018)* follows a similar pattern to other videogames and TV shows, although its mechanics and storyline may be completely different.

Such controversial differences are analyzed in this study, characters as Mimir and the less seen but often mentioned Tyr, the concepts of time through the nine realms and the role of the runes in the game.

Exploring the game and comparing it to several Tv shows and other videogames, it can be deduced that, against many expectations, it's not crucial to rely and be totally strict with the early myth when developing a game like *God of War (2018)*. Its original story was a great success for *Santa Monica Studio* as game developer as well as for the preservation of the Norse Myth itself.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

“Myth and fairy-story must, as all art, reflect and contain in solution elements of moral and religious truth (or error), but not explicit, not in the known form of the primary 'real' world” (J. R. R. Tolkien)

Our reality has always been influenced by those tales and folkloric stories that were so strongly believed in the past, as they were the explanations of many events occurring in those years.

Those tales are now reconstructed and reinvented through ideals and beliefs of our recent society, depicting the utopic dream we crave so desperately to be real, by simultaneously revealing the flaws and wickedness we live with. Storytelling and adaptation are two major tools that with which myths and folkloristic tales had such a huge impact in our society. Taking as an example elder authors like Homer, who wrote the *Illiad* and the *Odissey*, and Snorri Sturluson, given credit for the *Poetic Edda* and the *Prose Edda*, we can demonstrate how different Greek and Norse societies were completely different. We can cite more recent works like *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman and *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien, including contemporary works worth taking into consideration such as Marvel’s comics about Norse Mythology and Hajime Isayama’s *Attack on Titan*.

Through the assumption that every myth is the surrealistic representation of the society in which it was forged, we can analyze, thanks to historiographical applications such as Medievalism and Neomedievalism, how modern adaptations of those myths are developed, comparing the diversity between different cultures and different periods. Studying the case of Norse Mythology illustrated controversially by the recent Santa Monica Studios’ video game ‘*God of War (2018)*’, it is possible to demonstrate the redundancy of the several themes, as much as the editing process, like the inclusion and removal of details, in order to understand whether if it is society who molds the myth, or if the former that is shaped by its own utopic tales.

1.1 Background and context

This thesis is based on an analysis of the Norse myth, since its origins and of its main purposes, confronting how it would have represented the world and society of the Middle Ages and how, on the other hand, it represents contemporary society. This confrontation, also analyzed through various adaptations during the same time frame, leads to a case study of the game 'God of War (2018)'. Within this case study, we are going to analyze the major adaptations that have been included in the game, comparing controversial features like the role of runes and the cyclicity of time.

Having a prospect of how myths have been foretold and written from the Middle Ages until now, considering the evolution of our mindsets towards the fictional storytelling our beliefs about the myths have changed. Beforehand, in the midst of the Middle Ages, people used to be intrigued from myths and stories, since there wasn't any scientific prove to explain anything, nor a sufficiently educated and civilized audience that could understand such explanations.

At the present time the audience is informed each day about every past and current event, and it has become familiar for us to call anything untruthful and unfounded a 'myth'. This leads to a misinterpretation of the myth itself, one explanation is usually connected to the social and political interpretations of the myth, i.e. *stories that are made specifically to influence people in order to sell a product or even an ideological campaign* (Tikhonova, 2018; 134-138).

It is crucial to point out how adaptations and portrayals of the myths have changed, they are being shared, echoed, remodeled and adapted due to absence of creativity, although considering they are never completely neglected. By virtue of quick technological progress, myths adaptations have seen a new upgrade, as cinematography and videogame industry adapt old models and patterns. Interactive storytelling paired up with video games development has opened a new concept of content creation, how to share the atmosphere of the myth with a player and how to build interactive environment in the contained/enclosed world of a story.

1.2 Research question

It is evident how tv shows and games related to the Middle Ages often separate a unique world with its own rules, mechanics, environment and most importantly mythological plot structure, and simultaneously the remaining myth adaptations, a sequel or a 'spin-off' of a story familiar to most of the audience.

This thesis aims to understand by which means 'Santa Monica Studios', as game developer of 'God of War (2018)', have been re-adapting the Norse myth. It is also analyzed what kind of socio-cultural impact does have the continuous evolution of re-adaptation on the audience, not only regarding videogames, but also in the field of literature and cinema.

The main objective is to see how the interaction between the player and the story has been giving a different approach to the original content, which in this case is the Norse Myth, and how this new approach has been re-adapting the myth, in order to get a wider audience, both benefiting economically and culturally.

1.3 Methodology

For the comprehension of this thesis it has been chosen an approach introducing the conception of the Medieval, and hence the period this study is focusing on. Through Kellyann Fitzpatrick's studies on the concept of Medievalism, we were able to analyze most of the historiographical information required in order to provide a better perspective with which this study has been conducted.

Defining the Myth with a further focus on the Norse Mythology provided us the resources to further introduce the recurring themes and define the Runic alphabet, which are both detailed in Gianna Chiesa Isnardi's studies in her book *I Miti Nordici* (Chiesa Isnardi, 1991).

The study also presents the definition of Storytelling provided by Elias Garcia-Pelegrin's article *The Ape That Lived to Tell the Tale. The Evolution of the Art of Storytelling and Its Relationship to Mental Time Travel and Theory of Mind* (2021), along with its evolution

during the years, therefore focusing again on the Scandinavian culture. We analyzed how Norse Myth has been reconstructed with the passing of centuries, and hence how it was adapted to the modern and contemporary forms of storytelling, giving credit for example to Neil Gaiman's contemporary books or Marvel's comics.

Finally, it is introduced the case study of the thesis, the videogame developed by Santa Monica Studio 'God of War (2018)'. This allowed us to provide a controversial approach of re-adaptation that game developers applied on the Norse Mythology. With a comparative analysis of the original myth with the one depicted in the game, taking as examples some of the characters of the plot and features like the theme of time and the use of runes, we were able to see how Santa Monica Studios developed the game and re-constructed the myth.

1.4 Document Roadmap

Chapter 2 introduces Medievalism and Neomedievalism by firstly defining the historical period of the Middle Ages. The second part is followed by a study on the concept of the myth, analyzing its various forms within different cultures and periods and focusing on Scandinavian culture.

Storytelling and Adaptations are presented in Chapter 3, where defined Storytelling and its evolution since the first human trace on earth. An additional focus on Norse culture allows the second part of the chapter to analyze modern adaptations that Myths from this culture had with the passing of the centuries.

Chapter 4 introduces the videogame with a summary of the plot, therefore, proceeding with the comparative analysis. Here I analyze the differences between some characters of the game with their original versions, further analyzing the theme of time and the function of runes inside the game.

Finally, conclusions in chapter 5 include some game development decisions on the reconstructions of the Norse myths. Here we proceed with a further discussion on those decisions and various suggestions about the reason behind them.

CHAPTER 2

Studying the Medieval

It is mandatory to take a look into the studies that have been conducted on the Middle Ages and every notion from other periods that recalls and concerns the concept of Medieval. To do so, we have been looking at the origins of the concept of medieval, in order to better comprehend which branches of these studies are important to analyze.

Firstly, we identify the time period where the Middle Ages are located, then we introduce the concept of Medievalism, that helps us, with its different applications, to have a wider view of what is actually happening in that period historically, socially and culturally.

Secondly, through scripts and documentations, focusing on the Norse mythological domain, we have been able to get a big picture of how society worked and how people used the myth in order to explain events occurring during those years. Therefore, it has been analyzed the concept of myth, noting the reproduction through fantasy and fiction of the main events and phenomena, comparing these representations in both Medieval and nowadays' society.

2.1 The Middle Ages

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries it was developed the concept of a Middle Age, the period in European history from the collapse of Roman civilization in the 5th century to the Renaissance. Humanists first came up with the term 'Middle Ages', referring to that dark period of time lasted a thousand years, separated from any form of Greek or Roman civilization.

In order to fully visualize the concept of Middle Ages (or Dark Ages) it is helpful to consider the Migration Period that occurred by the late 10th century. The name of the period refers to the movement of so-called barbarian peoples into what had been the Western Roman Empire. Therefore, the Middle Ages present the confusing and often contradictory picture of a society attempting to structure itself

politically on a spiritual basis due to the collapse of the Roman Empire. Hence, without the Roman civilization, Norse society from the Scandinavian peninsula and the Icelandic territory, which will be the main focus for this study, is based on the foretelling of laws, stories and myths as a medium to teach and transmit orally their culture and knowledge through different generations. Scandinavian society developed a culture based on oral tradition,

In addition to what has been said, we proceed with the analysis of the concept of Medieval by defining Medievalism, the historical section that specializes in studies of the Middle Ages, and, as it can be noticed further in this chapter, the impact they had in former and modern societies.

2.1.1 Medievalism

This particular branch of historiography stands between Classicism and Modernism, collocating the period studied between the fall of the Roman Empire and the late 15th century. This term was originally created by Italian humanists to separate the so-called Renaissance from the Dark Ages. In fact, undergraduates identify stereotypes from fairy tales depicting that period in a fictional way, not knowing that the Middle Ages actually lasted a thousand years since the fall of the Roman Empire. In European history, the term medievalism sometimes appears as synonymous with religion and God. Most of medieval theology and philosophy revolved around the conception of a God and the religion that conducted it as a principle of legitimation for the exercise of power that kept society together under one authority.

Medievalism, when first appeared as a used term that identifies a reference to the Middle Ages, as Kellyann Fitzpatrick states, appears to have originated as both a derogatory term and one that signifies return of values. It is a concept that identifies any representation, reception or use of the Middle Ages in post-medieval eras, from revivals to political uses and abuses, it is the continuous reinterpretation of the Middle Ages, their reverberations, and impact. (Fitzpatrick, 2019; pp. 11-17)

It is difficult to find a sole definition of Medievalism, as there are difficulties between scholars and Medieval researchers to set the definition that best defines any reference to the medieval. Therefore, it has been suggested that there should be references to “Medievalisms”, in order to separate the academic field from other misinterpretations, poorly held by the audience, mostly undergraduates, leading to fictional and erroneous representations of the term.

Instead, for most scholars, medievalism is best recognizable with an artificial construct, based on the individual and society imagining it. In this way, there could be seen lots of interpretations and study cases in various centuries, considering written evidence as books and articles, as well as the modern media, such as cinema and videogames.

2.1.2 Neomedievalism

It is really difficult to specify a period of time where Medievalism could be simply set. It is rather impossible to find a precise point in history in order to analyze Neomedievalism.

Many scholars have analyzed Medievalism and Neomedievalism, stating that both describe the continuing process of creating the Middle Ages. Neomedievalism manages to be separate from Medievalism, it creates a “hyperreality” more real than reality itself, carves out its living in the furtive consumption of mass-produced commodities, yet also floats disembodied above a sea of already constituted academic disciplines, waiting to be formed into something solid and considered worthy of publication and tenure, as Fitzpatrick cites. The closest thing “neomedievalism” has to an imagined original source is Umberto Eco’s use of the term in his famous essay “Dreaming of the Middle Ages”, the continuing process of creating the Middle Ages, a process that constitutes the Middle Ages themselves.

It is also described as a post-modern ideology of medievalism, considering it non-other than a subsection of Medievalism, correlated to the postmodern.

The definitions provided by the MEMO's¹ website demonstrate the progression of types of medievalism that accompany post-medieval terms of periodization prevalent in critical thought: modernism and postmodernism.

MODERNIST MEDIEVALISM: Historical discontinuity, traditional values' rejection, leading to assumptions into new values – fragmentation of symbolic inheritance.

POST-MODERN MEDIEVALISM: It is more critical of contemporary perspectives of medieval values and societal codes. Less comprehensive, these narratives are constructed fragments of a fragmented history, constantly changing, whether or not medieval in nature.

NEOMEDIEVALISM: Histories are purposely fragmented, illusionary sense of power and denial of reality. Medieval concepts and values are purposely rewritten as a conscious vision of an alternative universe. Contemporary values dominate the traditional perceptions of the Middle Ages, infusing other medieval cultures, such as that of Japan (Fitzpatrick, 2019).

The key difference lies in the perception that neomedievalism is “more playful and in greater denial of reality.” While the list of postmodern theorists used is too long to include here, Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, which can be understood in postmodernity as a simulation of reality that has no “real” origin, seems particularly popular in articulating definitions of neomedievalism.

This concept of hyperreality creates a pattern in the analysis and interpretation of the Medieval that leads to a connection between reality and fiction, moving towards the concept of myth. Later in this chapter, it will be seen, on the one hand, how myths and tales depict society, on the other hand, how cultures are affected and influenced by those same myths.

¹ The Medieval Electronic Multimedia Organization (MEMO), a group of researchers that formed during the proceedings of the 2002 International Congress on Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo, had a major role in the development of the definitions of medievalism, not to mention Neomedievalism itself.

<http://medievalelectronicmultimedia.blogspot.com/>

2.2 The myth

Several researchers like J. Campbell, K. Jung, R. Barthes, M. Eliade all around the world were involved in mythological studies. They have suggested theories and ideas that now serve as a basis for further analysis of the matter. There have been many attempts to define a universal notion of myth, but it is difficult to develop one exact definition that would encompass all aspects of the myth. Indeed, it is a very broad term that includes many topics, from tales of heroes with underlying historical evidence of existence, e.g. the stories of *Ragnarr Lothbrok*, to the tales of the gods and supernatural creatures.

“Myths are symbolic tales of the distant past (often primordial times) that concern cosmogony and cosmology (the origin and nature of the universe), may be connected to belief systems or rituals, and may serve to direct social action and values” (Magoulick, 2004).

“Stories by means of which our forebears were able to assimilate the mysteries that occurred around them” (Leeming, 1990).

“Myths are Narratives that are counter-factual in featuring actors and actions that confound the conventions of routine experience” (McDowell, 1998).

It is the story that answers questions that are not set on any specific time and serves as a *raison d'être* to the generations, passing on centuries of inherited experience. It is highly dependent on culture and society in which it is matured; it is born out of the people, their values and knowledge of the world, their language. In many instances, myth is often confused with folklore, which is the collective oral wisdom of a community, treated as fiction, usually secular, set any time or place often outside of time and place. Humans or animals serve as the main characters and the stories may justify current customs for the society.

Essentially, myth is a story based on history and tradition, created by the people throughout their values and knowledge. Truth be told, 'Myth' comes from the Greek word '*mythos*', which means story or tale; though it differs from a story as the myth doesn't suggest just one meaning, but it can carry several interpretations, based on the cultural reality one individual may live in.

Subjects like the creation of humankind and the world, as well as the existence of wicked creatures like dragons or dwarves, allude all to guidance in the search of the meaning of life. Myths offer simplicity and comfort, in order to explain what happens around the world. Joseph Campbell offers a wide perspective, explaining the other functions of the myth:

- The pedagogical function (1) It identifies the individual within a society, guides them through the course of life and governs personal growth. The rite of initiation common in many cultures is one of the best examples to illustrate the pedagogical function. Special ritual is to be held, at a certain age, in order to set an event in which a boy can officially turn into a man, beginning to contribute and develop as a person in the society.
- The second, metaphysical function (2) refers to the ability of a man to stand speechless in front of the marvels of the universe. The environment triggers natural human curiosity and reflects in this function of the myth. The strive to learn and the human creative drive are being powered by myth, embedded into us from the early years of our existence.
- The cosmological function (3) of the myth is to provide the picture about universe and explain the natural events a human being spectator. It helps making sense when nothing does, encourages curiosity about the world men inhabit, but finding an explanation to such natural phenomena as the change of day and night, thunder, etc.
- The social (4) function refers to the ability of the myth to govern society, create rules and order for a fruitful and successful advancement of each of its members. It sets “a shared set of rights and wrongs, proprieties or improprieties, on which your particular social unit depends for its existence” (Campbell, 2004).

All myths in the world apply these functions, even though some cultures and their narrative traditions could be drastically different from each other, but it is possible to trace similar traits and tales in them. These common patterns are studied by comparative mythology, and have been identified as *monomyth*.

- Myth is a story that provides with a certain picture of the world. As it was discussed earlier, it is one of the main *cosmological* functions of the myth;
- In a myth the protagonists are often of supernatural or divine origin, e.g. The daughter of a king becoming a Valkyrie in Norse myth;
- The times of the action in myth usually takes place long before the moment it is being told
- The story could also switch *realms* or worlds, and heroes traveling into supernatural is often involved;
- These heroes also tend to possess superhuman power, i.e. Shapeshifting, superhuman strength or even appetite.

To sum up, a message through the story is expressed, it provides guidance to a person of a certain time period and culture, depicting traditions and fixing values – in this way, the myth depicts society they were born within, defining its cultural traits.

2.2.1 Myth Nowadays

Today the myth is associated with something inaccurate or false, where the target audience is primarily children. In the age of rapidly progressing technological advancement, we see myths being created, discovered and forgotten every day. We are seeing false advertisement that uses stories with strong emotional impact to sell; we see fake news that create narratives that shape the political world today. However, the old myth today now comes in the form of superstitions, moral codes and etiquette, rules common in a society.

The time in which a certain myth is set in determines the plausibility of the myth itself, considering that it may not always seem completely logical to the public. “The importance of time in mythology can be seen in part through Joseph Campbell’s insistence that mythology must be current with the science of its day. This issue has rendered much of the older mythology irrelevant because vital aspects have been disproven by science” (Smith, 2013). On the contrary, contemporary science fiction makes use of a hypothetical futuristic setting, making it highly unlikely to discredit its statements. The problem with science

fiction is that often contradicts the science of its day, making it impossible to create a myth, since it would neglect it. For example, myths depict the creation of the world in order to explain and help people understand their surroundings as long as they are considered to exist only in the past, making explanations ineffective.

In the essay *A Structural Study of Myth* (Lévi-Strauss, 1955), Lévi-Strauss argues that myth exists in both historical and ahistorical times. “The historical aspect of mythology lies in its plot; the sequence of events being described that happened long ago. The ahistorical aspect lies in the fact that the specific pattern described is everlasting; it explains the present and the past as well as the future” (Smith, 2013). If the myth is separated from historical and ahistorical aspects, it would not be able to apply the functions defined by Campbell (metaphysical, cosmological, sociological, and psychological). Science fiction works with the same functions, but in a slightly different way,

However, myth is still alive in our society not only through the means of following certain traditions and rituals, but it also still lives in stories we tell, i.e. the entertainment industry, which includes cinematography, popular literature, music and video games.

2.2.2 Recurring Mythological themes

Since the origin of the foretelling of tales and myths, there have been several common features familiar to different cultures, even though they have never had any form of interaction. These recurring features develop themes appearing in literary tales, features like courage, loyalty, the importance of family or the benefits of hard work are often related to Greek Mythology as well as to Norse, African, Asian and American Mythology. Literary scholars identified in different geographical areas surprising similarities in the themes of myth and folklore. Lévi Strauss states that there is an ‘astounding similarity between myths collected in widely different regions’ leading a focus on ‘questions of emphasis, of inversion of plot, selective omission and addition, reinterpretation and every form of variation’ (Kuckhohn, 1959; pp. 268-279).

The good fighting the evil, often followed by the theme of redemption, including the theme of the hero, associated with the theme of fate. Greek heroes tend to share uncommon strength, immense bravery, and noble morality. They also depend upon a certain degree of clever ingenuity to achieve success. For example, Perseus could not have killed Medusa if he did not have the smarts to steal the Gray Women's eye. Exceeding the limits of average men, the heroes act somewhere between gods and mortals in the hierarchy of the Greek myths. Their stories are some of the most memorable; consider Theseus, Hercules, and Perseus. Through these figures, the modern reader can understand many Greek values.

In tales depicting the creation, incest is a recurring theme in Celtic, Greek and Hindu cultures, where there can be analyzed three cases – father-daughter, mother-son and brother-sister. 'In creation tales there are also various references to the seduction of a mother-in-law by her son-in-law' (Kuckhohn, 1959; pp. 268-279).

Flood is another major theme founded in most of the mythologies in the world, possibly originated in the Near East, along with the Slaying of monsters, appearing with greater frequency in North America.

In most cases we cannot confirm that these images are widespread, either because of the lack of proof or because of known exceptions, but we can say that some are known from all of the major culture areas of the world.

2.3 Norse Myth

It is crucial to provide the archaeological evidence to have a complete comprehension of what is the Norse myth. From the Bronze Age (1500–500 BC) onwards, the Scandinavian peoples and their ancestors produced a quantity of artefacts in (among other materials) wood, metal or stone, including several carved or molded figures of human shape, or inscribed pictures showing similar beings, or animals, engaged in various activities. Perhaps the best-known

example is the small bronze seated figure holding what looks like a large hammer, discovered in Iceland and plausibly identified as a representation of the god Thor.

The literary sources for Old Norse mythology consist mainly of Icelandic texts in either prose or verse. The only important exception is the Latin *Gesta Danorum*, a history of the Danes in 16 books by the Dane Saxo Grammaticus, born about AD 1150.

The literary sources in Icelandic include skaldic poetry, a term usually applied to the works of named poets (skalds) during the Viking Age, often composed in praise of historical kings or other powerful persons, and much of it preserved as quotations in Icelandic prose works of various kinds, including the sagas. The metrical form of skaldic verse is especially complex; but the main difficulty for the modern reader lies in its elaborately figurative diction, even though our background knowledge, based on other literary sources, let us comprehend the myths to which these verses allude.

These Icelandic verses are based on Eddic poetry, referring then to Snorri Sturluson's Poetic Edda, the most reliable source when it comes to the transcription of pagan myths. About 35 Eddic poems survive, the most important of which is the Codex Regius, written towards the end of the thirteenth century. The first mythological poem in the Codex Regius is *Völuspá*, where there are depicted the creation, the destruction and the reconstruction of the universe.

There are assumptions made by scholars that prove the existence of the oral compositions to be significantly older than the transcriptions, due to a predominance of the orality and a late appearance of a written culture. The first transcribed evidence dates back to the second century AD, with a delay of 800 years compared to the Greek Mythology. More sophisticated texts have been written only in the Viking Age, including the Codex Regius, here are incorporated 29 tales of gods and heroes. There can be brought as examples the tales about gods like Odin and Thor, or the adventures of heroes like Sigurd.

Creatures like dragons and dwarves, themes like the fear of an inevitable end, the perpetual seek of knowledge and especially the struggle in changing one's destiny; these are all characteristics that are in a way similar to the Greek myths,

but it's noticeable the massive difference with which Norse mythology is much more ominous, dark and mysterious.

Obscure elements like runes and dark magic (also known as *seiðr*) play a huge unique role in shamanism in Scandinavian society, making the use of small objects with carvings in order to make an enchantment, or more realistically speaking, giving a sign of good luck or even a curse.

2.3.1 The uniqueness of Runes in Scandinavian culture

During the Viking Age, particularly in the 11th century, the presence of runic relics was considerably more relevant. Inscriptions in portable objects like weapons, bones and sticks of wood, carvings on rocks or even church-related objects are proof to the unicity of the Runes, that are distinguished from other written evidences thanks to their originality, since they are not a copy of a document in a manuscript.

These inscriptions are difficult to interpret, not only because they were very short, but because the symbols belong to the runic alphabet, also known as Futhark (*fupark*). The runes were carved on portable objects with magic purposes, for example *Fehu* [ᚠ], the first character of the Elder Futhark, indicates prosperity and material wealth, either won or earned income and it can represent good luck, abundance and financial success in the near future. Another symbol is Tiwaz [ᚢ], representative of the warrior's arrowhead of the God Tyr. It shows that you are capable of spearheading your way through all your troubles and possess great leadership skills, authority and rationality. It can indicate victory and knowing of your true strengths with a willingness to self-sacrifice.

I agree with Gianna Chiesa Isnardi's work *I Miti Nordici* (Chiesa Isnardi, 1991 pp.100-104), where she explains how 'Runes are supposed to be the secret core of existence, as they contain the essence of life, whether it's beneficial or harmful, having the power to destroy, as well as to create. Rumor has it that runes have divine origins, having beforehand a magical entity, and secondly functioning as alphabetic symbols. Etymologically, *rún* are 'secrets' and 'mysteries', recalling

the action of whispering a magical spell. Therefore, runes represent a symbol of greater knowledge and the divine ability of writing, leading to a further reference of a poem where Odin learns from Freya the dark magic, and then uses it to achieve the runes from Mimir, and from his great sacrifice in order to obtain knowledge. We can confirm the correlation between dark magic and runes by stating that Odin, in Snorri's tales, learned about runes and magic after he met Freya, the very first who taught sieder to the Aesir gods.

Some runes are also described in the dialogue between the hero Sigurdr and the Valkyrie named Brunhild, where the Valkyrie explains to the hero the runes of joy, victory and the ones of grief and death. Therefore, runes are also used to protect a hero in his journey from foes and misfortunes, confirming that they were used also in real-life circumstances as charms.

CHAPTER 3

Storytelling and literary adaptation

In order to understand where we stand in the universe and our future possible destinations, we use that part of our existence so called stories and storytelling. By listening to stories, we are able to gain information about challenging experiences that other individuals had, developing further information about possible outcomes in our own challenges.

Therefore, Storytelling is defined as form of art and, 'artists engage in the process of creation to narrate their thoughts, emotions, or even complex ideology regarding the world they find themselves living in, and perhaps it is the finesse with which these ideas are conveyed to the observer of art that might epitomize the skill of the artist' (Garcia-Pelegrin, 2021; p. 3). Some artistic products do not convey a narrative structure, not providing the observer with sufficient information with the intention of deducing the story behind that artefact.

3.1 Evolution of storytelling

Starting from the very beginning of mankind, Neanderthals learned many artistic behaviors such as painting and tool making, suggesting that they possessed a form of linguistic communication too. This is thanks to the evolution of adaptive mechanisms for survival.

The *Homo Erectus*' body language allowed them to reenact events to one another, therefore, the ability to remember experiences from the past and to create and plan possible outcomes for the future led us to suggest that there might have been a development in a form of narrative between them. We can agree with Garcia-Pelegrin when he states 'In the late 1960s, the American geneticist John Pfeiffer suggested that language evolved around 40,000 years ago alongside pictorial art to aid the transmission of knowledge between conspecifics' (Garcia-Pelegrin, 2021; p. 5).

Communication and its many varieties have in common the characteristic of symbolism, which in storytelling, symbols are used to create a link between art and communication. Symbolism is often connected to memory and hence 'it is impossible for a spectator of a story, to be able to fully appreciate the symbolic concept underlying the narrative that is currently being experienced, as the spectator does not have access to the full picture of the story' (Garcia-Pelegri, 2021; p. 9).

3.1.1 Norse Older Theories and Methods

It used to be prevailing to gather up references in the written texts to oral storytelling and the recitation of poetry and present them to the audience in such a way as to imply 'There is oral tradition for you! The early Icelanders told stories and recited poetry to each other all the time!' (McTurk, 2004; pp. 285-300).

There is a famous chapter in support of the oral case, in the *Sturlunga saga*, describing a wedding at a chieftain's farm at Reykjaþólar in the early twelfth century. At the wedding, the entertainment is said to have included stories of the legendary saga type told by a priest.

From around 1300 there is a reference to the Icelandic poet, writer and law-speaker *Sturla Þórðarson* (a nephew of Snorri Sturluson) telling a story, some decades earlier, to some followers of the Norwegian king on a ship off the coast of Norway. The saga states that Sturla told his tale better than other tellers, but it is possible that it might have been in written form as the queen requested him to meet her and bring the saga with him.

From around the same time a more clearly literary text has survived, *Nornagests þáttur*, set at the Norwegian court around the year 1000, in which a traveller, Nornagestr probably the god *Oðinn* in disguise, comes to the great missionary king *Oláfr Tryggvason* and recites old pagan poetry touching on much the same subject matter as do the heroic poems of the Edda.

These references were sufficient to convince earlier generations of scholars that Icelanders had told artistic stories to each other in Iceland as well as in the royal

courts of Scandinavia where they earned their living as court poets and historians. In general, the sagas are written as if they sought to reflect an oral tradition that lay behind them. They are full of fixed formulae such as: 'it is said that...', 'some say that...but others say that...', 'he himself [referring to a character in the saga] later said that...' and so on, and the point of view is always limited to what could theoretically have been seen and told to others (McTurk, 2004; 285-300).

3.1.1.1 The Comparative Method and Historical Development

While it was accepted that traditional oral poetry and stories made use of fixed formulae and fitted into pre-structured themes, it was also recognized that elements such as these could equally well be deployed by writers who were not performing in front of a live audience. Gradually it became clear that oral tradition could not be recorded satisfactorily without the aid of modern technology. An oral performer would hardly use the same words when reciting his or her repertoire to a scribe as he or she would in a real-life setting.

The conclusion must be that it is impossible to distinguish the oral from the written in saga texts because they are all eventually written down in a literary style. But rather than abandoning the investigation it may instead be worthwhile to rethink the fundamental question about orality and literacy in relation to these texts.

3.1.2 Contemporary Storytelling

By means of the accelerated globalization, it can be seen how storytelling has greatly changed. It is possible to notice how cross-cultural assimilation and adaptation, along with the process of merchandising and networking, has further helped with the globalization. The rapidly progressive technological advancement and digitalization of information facilitated their combination. It is most clearly seen on the example of Norse Mythology, in the last few years used extensively in popular culture, e.g. *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman and in the Marvel

cinematic universe, or newer videogames such as God of War 4 or Assassin's Creed: Valhalla.

Modern storytelling uses, creates new and changes traditional mythological archetypes. Cinematography, for example, is one of the key modern myth providers today and, despite the similarities and common traits with the ancient one, it has developed new traits to the mythological storytelling.

Along with the old mythological archetypes, new cinema clichés and standards are being utilized in modern storytelling.

Firstly, however, because of the rapidly changing pace of society development and as a consequence rapidly changing myths, the clash of different opinions, caused by a difference in the world image, can lead to major uprising in the society. In the second place, the idea of myth heroes being superior to humans still has importance in modern world, e.g. the protagonists of commercials. Furthermore, myths still feature a strong ability to deliver a message, make an impact and provide guidance, the attribute which is being employed in all different manners: from being a means to sell a product to making a strong political statement. Digital media, effectively promoting communication in the world community, now serves as a main medium for myth creation and distribution. In addition, myths have ceased to exist as a product of a single culture; new myths are being made internationally due to the advancing process of globalization. Finally, as humanity has developed in the last centuries and has established many scientific truths, the purpose of myth as Chaos conqueror diminished; nevertheless, the tradition of 'naming the unknown' in order to understand it is still valid.

3.2 Modern adaptation of the Norse Myth

'It is a complex process where remakes, literary translations, retellings, parodies, condensations, sequels, prequels, and spin-offs portray the diversity of the approach during the reconstruction of the original source' (Graves, 2016; pp. 1-17). Scholars consider adaptation as appropriation, hyper textuality and intertextual dialogism, one in particular, Linda Hutcheon, in her studies,

approaches adaptation from three different perspectives – as a formal product, a process of creation and a mode of engagement.

Adaptation refers to a productive act, a process of creation characterized by re-interpretation and re-creation. One of the main purposes of adaptation is to accommodate the original work to the human psychological comprehension of a specific period as much as possible, in order to entertain a higher range of audience. Depending on the period, the reconstruction of a story or a myth is also modelled so that it adapts to society of that specific time.

An issue with contemporary adaptations is 'the troubling disinterest in how adaptations come to be, specifically how the various institutional, commercial and legal frameworks surrounding adaptations profoundly influence the number and the character of adaptations in cultural circulation'. (Murray, 2011; pp. 4) We can confirm that literary adaptation is strongly linked to marketing interests, more specifically to what the audience wants to see. It is more profitable for a company, whether it publishes books or produces movies and videogames, to adapt the product to the psychological comfort-zone of the audience, often luring out major details of the main source.

We can see an example of this case with the adaptations of the *Harry Potter's* novel series, which were strongly adapted to the cinematic audience, leaving the original book series fans disappointed from the massive amount of details edited.

Further in this chapter I will present some cases of contemporary adaptation, seeing how it varies in different perspectives, such as books, comics, movies and videogames.

3.2.1 Books

The most reliable written source with reference to the Norse Myths are Snorri Sturluson's Prose Edda and Poetic Edda. From these books, many others were written during the years, whether focusing on the original myths, or just slightly referring to them.

One author that overshadows amongst the others is Neil Gaiman, given credit for his works such as *American Gods* (2001) and *Norse Mythology* (2017). Gaiman's works are the perfect example to have a wider look of how the Medieval is represented and adapted in our societies.

In an interview at Boston Public Library, conducted by Jared Bowen, Gaiman explains his point of view and his opinion about adaptation and retelling the Norse myths.

Neil Gaiman: Norse Mythology and American Gods²

Gaiman brings some examples from Snorri Sturluson's Prose Edda, stories about Thor and Loki to demonstrate how many details can be changed and others can't, as well as additions that cannot be made. That is because many tales in Sturluson's book may lack of details, details that one could remodel, in order to make those additions that can explain some mysterious events unexplained in the first place. If the Myth is considered a fictional portrait of the society where it was created, then those details added or modified are a method with which the author sees the world and how many unexplained elements he is harshly unraveling through metaphors and symbols.

One major issue of adaptation is that many details and elements form the myths only appear, without further stories or explanations about its origins. Gaiman explains how people don't understand many references of names and elements that don't have stories, suggesting they were not wrote down, but only foretold orally.

3.2.2 Comics

As an example, for the adaptations of the Norse myth we can analyze how Stan Lee's Marvel representations of Thor and Loki were not so accurate for those

² Neil Gaiman's interview, where Gaiman joins Jared Bowen, Executive Arts Editor at WGBH, for a conversation at the Boston Public Library https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mX7pvtU9m_w:

who already are experienced with the original myths would expect, whether he/she would be an expert or not. Inaccuracy towards the body features for Thor, originally red-headed, tall and slightly over-weight, Lee's depiction lures out every detail except his height and hammer.

A further case, but less familiar, may be represented by Hajime Isayama, the author of *Attack on Titans*, a manga based on the Norse myth. This Japanese comic-book series highlights an intricate story, revealing many themes as retaliation, a pre-written destiny that the main character is bound to pursue, the details lacking by choice of the author (or mangaka) in order to grant a sense of mystery and a perpetual enigmatic atmosphere. These themes are very common in Norse mythology and culture, but there are several elements that may recall a Norse and Medieval connection. The setting in which the story takes place is a pseudo-medieval walled town with stone houses, recalling a medieval west-European environment. Massive walls surround and protect the city from the titans, basically terrorize humanity by cannibalizing them. Any fiction including giants understandably gets compared to ancient Norse giants since those myths are the foundation of the evil, towering monsters.

The huge reference to Norse myths is Ymir, a girl who can transform into a Titan, worshipped by a cult who believed her to be descending from the very first Titan who gave the transformation power to other nine giants. In the Norse myth Ymir is the first Jötun (giant), slayed by Odin and his brothers, in order to create Midgard. The giants in Norse culture are mostly evil, though they are the first beings to come into existence and Asgardians can draw a straight line in their lineage to giants.

The manga is still ongoing, 'taking the plot towards a hypothetically-apocalyptic end, recalling Ragnarök, the end of the world and the death of most of the Asgardians by hand of the Jötuns'. (Holm, 2021; p. 1)

3.2.3 Movies and TV Shows

Adaptation in the cinematic world requires a different approach, in this case, details and edits are more likely to occur, often changing, or even erasing, most of those features that give the Norse Myths a shade of dark and mysterious.

The film-maker has to decide, following several criteria like seasonality, width and location, which strategic moves to make, in order to get the most profitable and successful outcome. The movie-making industry is strongly related to the influence of the United States, which are the best film distributors in the globe. On the contrary, for the case of a releasing literary adaptation in opposition to a Hollywood model, it may prove a 'cost-effective marketing tactic' (Murray, 2011; pp. 165-166), resulting distinguished and acknowledged by the audience accustomed to the mainstream American products.

The case of the MCU (Marvel Cinematic Universe) is quite disappointing if considering the reliability towards Norse Mythology and culture, for example, it has already been analyzed how Stan Lee's representation of Thor is mostly unfaithful. It is of less inaccuracy when considering the recent TV show *Loki* (2021), which gives a small increase in reliability. The series focuses on the theme of time and time-travelling, a recurring theme in Norse mythology, developing this theme to be as intricate and mysterious as in the original tales. The theme of time within the Norse culture representations appears to be more difficult to comprehend than other acknowledged ones.

The next adaptation field, which is the Video Games development, having a preponderant interactive approach, makes it easier for the audience to understand the highly controversial theme of time. Next to this theme, we will consider the presence of the Runes, which both will be analyzed in the next chapter, studying the case of *God of War* (2018).

3.2.4 Video Games

Adapting a mythological tale, which is usually depicted thanks to the personal ability to reproduce a detail only described by simple words, whether it's a

character or a whole setting, will always require the omission, as well for the addition, of some major details. In the interactive experience of a videogame, as close as it may get the player to the story, there will always be that part of the audience who does not completely relate on how the game developers have been trying to depict a reconstructed story from an original source.

One of the crucial reasons why this happens is because, when recreating a story from its original source, game developing studios reinvent some details, regardless if minor or major. The second reason, especially concerning Norse mythology, is the lack of details and the sole appearance of many scenarios or characters in the original source, without any explanation or in-depth analysis. This mostly happens to games related to Scandinavian Mythology where the sources do not always provide the details needed by game developers, so they add characters, background stories, and other visual details not mentioned in the original sources.

In the next chapter, I will be presenting and analyzing some critical details in the case study of the Norse Mythology-based videogame 'God of War (2018)', where we can further see why the developers of this game decided to edit the original myth, in order to adapt it to the game.

CHAPTER 4

Case Study: *God of War (2018)*

This *Santa Monica Studios*³ role-playing video game, winner of several awards like for design, narrative, music and non-other than the 'Game of the Year' award, suits perfectly when it comes to represent the adaptation of Norse Mythology.

In the early 2000s, in the old-generation consoles, Greek mythology was the setting the game focused on for the first trilogy, resulting completely different in design and mechanics.

Greek mythology is a setting full of stories, characters and details, with which Santa Monica Studios made several other spin-off videogames, this was possible thanks to the vastness of written resources that Greek culture has, including the countless re-adaptations of the tales like the *Odyssey* and characters like the Greek pantheon of gods, appearing of course in the franchise.

On the contrary, Norse mythology has a smaller amount of documentation due to the lack of written evidence that has already been conveyed (see Chapter 2). Norse myths and tales have been transcribed only in the 13th century - supposing that tales and myths are much older than the written proofs, we can suggest also that details within the tales have been constantly removed, edited and added. Considering that this phenomenon can be noticed even in the latest works of re-adaptations for the Norse Mythology, we can demonstrate how this cannot happen for the Greek one.

Greek culture is vastly documented, thanks to the advance of 800 centuries of written evidence; this demonstrates the complexity of editing in adaptations, as they are more likely to adhere to the original sources.

³ Santa Monica Studio is an American video game developer based in Los Angeles. A first-party studio for Sony Interactive Entertainment, it is best known for developing the *God of War* series. The studio was founded in 1999 by Allan Becker and was located in Santa Monica, California, relocated to Playa Vista in 2014.

However, Norse culture, having details removed or edited, makes tales and stories much vaguer and more mysterious, leading a later generation of adaptations to add several details lacking, in order to complete many unconcluded and unexplained tales. Having decided the Scandinavian setting for the next videogame, functioning as a sequel to the former trilogy, the developers had the opportunity to provide the audience with a different perspective, giving their own image to Norse mythology. In this manner, *Santa Monica Studios* made Kratos, the protagonist of the previous trilogy, includible in the Scandinavian setting, for example, as they did with Greek mythology, most gods from the new pantheon play the role of the antagonists, making Kratos once again the protagonist.

God of War (2018) was a clean slate for the franchise too, giving a new look and an opportunity to explore the new-generation consoles, which in this case would be the PS4.

4.1 Plot

The main plot of the game functions as a new beginning for the main character, Kratos, a Spartan warrior, who took the place of the Greek god of war Ares. In the previous games he had taken his vengeance against the Greek Gods, developing a hateful sentiment towards that kind. The game begins depicting him and his son Atreus in the woods of an ancient Norway, both grieving the death of his second wife, the Jötnar named Faye. After a hunting session and the preparation of the pyre to honor the dead, a stranger, who later reveals to be Baldur, joins Kratos at his mansion and starts a violent confrontation, eventually settled unsuccessfully for the Norse god.

Later the Spartan and his son begin jointly their new journey, leaving their half-destroyed home in the woods, seeking the highest peak in all realms to spread the ashes of Atreus' mother. In this journey they encounter several obstacles, as

well as many helping hands like the dwarven brothers Brok and Sindri⁴, helping them with gear improvements and fast-traveling within realms. Further, they meet a friendly witch, who later is revealed to be Freya, Baldur's mother and former wife to Odin. Following, Jörmungandr⁵, the world serpent, guides them throughout their journey between realms like Alfheim, using the power of the Bifröst⁶. Eventually, they reach for the highest peak in Midgard and they realize that Baldur is still alive, as he is talking with Magni and Modi, the two sons of Thor. Soon, Kratos and Atreus discover thanks to the imprisoned man, non-other than Mimir, that the actual highest peak resides in Jötunheim⁷, and that every access to this realm has been blocked by Odin. Mimir reveals then another access to the realm of the giants, and in order to do so, Kratos had to cut off Mimir's head and revive it from the witch in the woods.

Carrying Mimir's head, they proceed their journey to retrieve the rune that helps them access the portal to Jötunheim. In the meantime, Atreus falls ill due to a self-contradiction for not knowing that in reality he is a god, Kratos travels to Helheim to gather the ingredients for the cure and later tells Atreus he is a god. They have a clash with Magni and Modi, having the former killed and the latter fled, but during a second confrontation with a battered Modi, Atreus, full of godly pride, murders the son of Thor, opposing Kratos' orders seeing him ashamed enough of his loss. After gathering the item required, they return to the summit in Midgard, finding Baldur and having a second conflict, causing the destruction of the portal and eventually, forcing them back to Helheim. Here Kratos is haunted by several visions of his previous life, especially depicting Zeus.

⁴ Brok and Sindri are two dwarves, they are the gods' blacksmiths and they forged most of the weapons wielded by the Aesir, such as the hammer Mjölfnir and Odin's spear Gungnir.

⁵ Jörmungandr is a giant serpent often depicted surrounding the earth and biting his own tail. He is one of the three sons of Loki, along with the wolf Fenrir and Hel, the queen of the dead. His archenemy is non-other than the sin of Odin, Thor.

⁶ Bifröst is a burning rainbow bridge that reaches between Midgard (Earth) and Asgard, the realm of the gods. The bridge ends in heaven at Himinbjörg, the residence of the god Heimdallr, who guards it from the jötnar. The bridge's destruction during Ragnarök by the forces of Muspell is foretold

⁷ Jötunheim, also known as Jötunheimr, is one of the Nine Realms of the World Tree, home of the ancient race of Jötnar

Escaping from the realm of the dead, Mimir realizes that there is another access to the land of the giants. They retrieve Mimir's missing eye into the serpent's stomach and get immediately attacked one last time by Baldur. Baldur gets pierced by a tip of an arrow made with mistletoe, attached to Atreus' clothes, breaking the spell that made the Norse god invincible. After the huge clash, Kratos fractures Baldur's neck, as he was attempting to kill his own mother, Freya. The witch, in rage, swears her vengeance upon the two protagonists, then holds the corpse of her dead son and grieves.

The two leave the battleground and proceed towards Jötunheim, there they find a temple in a cave with a mural showing their adventures, revealing that the giants had foreseen everything happened and foretold what was to come. They discover that Faye was a giant and that she gave Atreus' the name of Loki, making him part mortal, god and giant. They continue to walk towards the highest peak, where they fulfill their promise of spreading Faye's ashes.

In their way back to Midgard, Mimir warns them that Fimbulwinter began, meaning that in three years Ragnarök is soon to follow.

The game is going to have a sequel named 'God of War: Ragnarök', still developing, expecting to be released by the end of 2022.

4.2 Analyzing myth and adaptation

In the plot, there can be noted some of the most recognizable features of Norse mythology, the journey of the hero, moving toward an inevitable end already predicted in a settled destiny. This theme may be applied to the main character Kratos, which slightly aligns with the same type of journey Odin takes in the original tales, with the difference that Odin here is known to be a villain, attempting to escape from a tormenting fate when Ragnarök comes.

Another important feature, aiding the storytelling within the game, is the function of side quests. Whenever the player explores the nine realms in the game, many secondary missions are available throughout the whole story, so the player may play it whenever he pleases. This helps the game developers maintaining a high

level of interest towards the game and Scandinavian myth, allowing the player to complete these side quests even after the completion of the game. We can see two purposes fulfilled thanks to these missions, on the first hand, the player gets significant upgrades and experience with the combat system, on the other hand, they include a wide range of characters and settings not suited for the main story missions.

This is a game developing decision in order to give the appropriate attention to details to other characters, since within the main story they could have been introduced, but only briefly. Many creatures like dragons, Valkyries and ogres are part of those side quests. Each one's story is introduced by Mimir or Atreus, giving essentials about their strengths and vulnerabilities. This is a masterful use of adaptation within videogames, where developers decided to provide information about the myth itself, along with the requirements to complete a mission.

4.2.1 Týr and Kratos – The two gods of war

This character, as Snorri recites, is supposed to be the son of Odin, belonging to the Aesir lineage, on the contrary, other sources tell that he is son of the giant Hymir. The origin of his name suggest he was once considered the father of the gods and head of the pantheon, since his name is ultimately cognate to that of Dyeus, the reconstructed chief deity from Indo-European religion. His bravery and wisdom inspired the warriors, invoking him and carving the runes on the sword and making him the god of war and justice. He is represented by the rune Tiwaz [↑], which recalls the shape of a spear or an arrow.

In the game, he is told to be the son of Odin and Hróðr and was the half-brother of Thor, Baldur, Hodr, and Bragi. He was a traveler of the world, wishing to learn about other cultures, believing it to be the only way to achieve true peace. The Giants were frightened by the Aesir's power, but trusted enough in Týr to allow Odin entry into Jötunheim for negotiations. Undiscovered to Týr however, Odin used the opportunity to spy and steal the Giants' secret wisdom, betraying the Jötnar's trust. The Giants expelled Odin from Jötunheim, cursing him never to return. Odin turned his wrath on the Giants of Midgard, allowing Thor to kill them

freely. Týr aided the Guardian of the Jötnar, Faye, in hiding the gate to Jötunheim in the space between realms, preventing Odin from ever having a direct way back to Jötunheim. Odin saw Týr as a threat to his power, suspecting him of plotting with the giants. As a result, Odin had Týr imprisoned, making everyone believe that he disappeared.

'God of War (2018)' introduces him as the god who fought in order to stop wars, the god who sought for a better future, trying to make peace between Aesir and Jötuns. The player knows this only through the words of Mimir's head during the gameplay and thanks to murals and shrines throughout the game. In those shrines and tales, he is loved by every living being in the Nine Realms, including gods and giants. When Mimir says - Týr believed the mind, not might was key to preventing war and chaos – he was referring to Týr's desire to travel and learn from every corner in every realm.

With this method used by the game developers to present some of the most interesting details about Norse mythology, the player is allowed to play, and passively listening to the tale Mimir is telling. Also, when the players interact with another mission or event in the game while Mimir is speaking, he stops his tale and begins again to speak about that story from where he left before being interrupted. With such storytelling technique, the game avoids several mistakes made by former game developers, boring the player by listening to a never-ending story, often skipping the whole story in order to get back at the game as soon as possible.

At this point Kratos is seen as the Greek god of war, making him the second god of war in the Norse Nine Realms, creating misinterpretations and unclearness at the beginning of the story within the audience. Later in the game, Kratos and his son Atreus find out that Týr is disappeared, suggesting that Kratos is now the only remaining god of war. Here the audience is put in front of an ambiguous situation, not knowing if the actual god of war will inherit the former's destiny to lose an arm, like in the original myth.

By the end of the game, in the temple in Jötunheim, the two protagonists find a mural where there is depicted the journey they had until that moment, later

discovering some paintings about their future. In one of these last murals, Kratos is laying down with one arm cut off, making the majority of the audience state that Kratos is actually inheriting Týr's destiny.

4.2.2 Mímir

In Norse Mythology, Mímir is a figure who is renowned for his knowledge and wisdom. In the great war between Vanir and Aesir gods, he is beheaded, brought back to life the head and gave it to Odin, who carries him around for secret knowledge. Mímir is related to Odin as he is his maternal uncle.

In 'God of War (2018)', he was a faerie king's errand boy who would walk amongst mortals to sow mischief and as long as his lord was kept amused, they were spared the consequences. Eventually, Mimir's king forced him to leave his homeland and ended up meeting Odin. Mimir provided him with a mystical well of knowledge, which was actually a well of water laced with enough mystic mushrooms to "make a god see visions". Mimir was hired as Odin's primary adviser and ambassador to all the other realms. However, Mímir's efforts to preserve peace would be frustrated by Odin's obsessions with prophecies and allowing his son, Thor, to go in battle against the Giants. Odin confronted Mimir, suspecting that he aided the Giants, therefore, imprisoning him on Midgard's highest peak, bound to an indestructible tree. The game introduces him when Baldur, along with his nephews, Thor's sons Magni and Modi, confronted him and convince him for revealing information about Kratos and his child. Right after the three god's visit, Kratos and Atreus introduce themselves to Mimir, then he agreed on helping them reaching the highest peak by making them cut his head of the tree, and resurrecting it with someone who knows the old magic (Freya).

At this point we can see how his role in the original myth is brought within the game in order to give aid to the two protagonists, and not to Odin. This occurs because of the role that Odin is playing, such as that of the main antagonist. Going on with the journey, Mimir functions as the main storyteller, since whenever the two protagonists travel in the nine realms, he brings up some of the most known tales about Norse Mythology. During battles, Mimir serves as a second

pair of eyes for Kratos, normally alarming the Spartan that an enemy is attacking from one of his blind spots. These are all features adapted by the game developers in order to improve the interaction between the characters and the player.

4.2.3 Time and Time-travelling theme

'From the fortune-telling of the seer, it is foretold that, at the beginning of the life cycle, those who will survive, will also remember the runes' (Isnardi, 1991; p. 102).

From the original myth, we can analyze the concept of time as both cyclical and linear. The creation of the nine realms started from Ginnungagap, a massive void from which the realms of Muspelheim and Niflheim began to create life in its first forms. The first giants were born, giving birth to gods from Asgard and Vanaheim. Going fast-forward at the so called 'twilight of the gods', or Ragnarök, some of these gods will perish, and others will survive. After that, a new beginning occurs, confirming that life goes on, though not constricted in a loop, merging the concepts of cyclicity and linearity of the story. During the events when the Aesir are still alive, there are many figures like Odin who discover their destiny, having to live with the burden of an inevitable doom.

The game makes a deep dive in the theme of Time in the final scenes of the game, where, by the end of their journey, Kratos and Atreus discover a mural, in a cave in the realm of the giants, Jotunheim, where there is depicted their whole journey, including events that have not yet took place. Here they realize that their destiny too has already been written, as well as for the other gods and giants living in the nine realms.

Another case where the concept of time is sort of ambiguous may be when Mimir stated that, when Ragnarök takes place, a massive clash between Thor and Jörmungandr will befall. In this battle, Thor hits with his hammer Mjölner⁸ the

⁸ Mjölner is the hammer of Thor, the Aesir god associated with thunder. Mjölner is depicted in Norse mythology as one of the most fearsome and powerful weapons in existence, capable of even leveling mountains.

Serpent so heavy that the serpent itself was sent back in time. That's also the reason why it appears in Midgard way before it was born.

As a matter of fact, the son of Kratos, Atreus, by the end of the game, finds out on the same mural in Jotunheim that he was actually called Loki, the already-known god of mischief. Loki, in the original myth, is father to the wolf Fenrir, Hel, the queen of the dead, and the world-serpent, Jörmungandr; this proves as Mimir stated, this last character, in the story, does not belong to the same time-line the main characters are finding themselves in.

4.2.4 Runes

It has already been stated (Chapter 2) that runes had a major role during the belated development of Norse written culture, first appearing in Scandinavian countries during the Viking Age.

The runes in the game all belong to the elder Futhark, they can be found carved into walls, trees and shrines and they can be also found on moveable objects, especially collectibles that the player can find in order to obtain enchantments, power-ups or upgrades, applicable on weapons, armor and other gear.

In the Scandinavian culture, the ability to read and write runes is considered divine, considering blessed those who possess this gift. Originally, the one who had complete knowledge on runes and their functionality in magic, was Odin.

In the game's plot, Atreus assists in the fulfilment of his and his fathers' journey, thanks to his ability inherited by his mother to read and carve runes. He helps Kratos overcoming many obstacles in their journey by reciting and carving runes, or by moving and hitting in the correct order runic-engraved objects to unlock a passage or solve hidden riddles that, once solved, award the player with treasures and upgrades. These treasure chests contain especially collectibles that the player can find in order to obtain enchantments, power-ups or upgrades, applicable on weapons, armor and other gear, they can give strength, resistance to specific enemies and powerful new abilities that the player can use against several foes. Other games that adopt runes as an enchantment or an upgrade

are *Doom: Eternal* and *Dishonored 2* who may not have a strong correlation with Norse culture, being proof that the use of runes in videogames is increasing.

The way in which runes are being translated directly from the co-protagonist of the game is one of the most intriguing features *God of War (2018)* has. Runes are still difficult to translate and interpret, and the game developers knew that some inscriptions and translations from elder futhark would have been even harder to transmit to the players. In this case, many historians and scholars analyzed the runes in the game, giving many explanations and feedbacks about them in articles and interviews. *Santa Monica Studios* added some original runes in some of the realms, though they are not original runes, they are mixes of symbols and runes. This technique of inventing runes has already been used within other games, the difference here is how the game developers decided to deal with this issue. In *God of War (2018)*, when the two protagonists interact with such runes, Atreus, the only one accustomed with runes, tells that he doesn't know how to translate them, as he doesn't know that writings. By doing so, the game kept the symbols, explaining that those are runes from another language, recalling one of the already cited Neomedievalist traits (see Chapter 2), when the reconstruction of some realistic features like runes does not only follow the original sources, but creates a new surrealistic element within the story.

Chapter 5

Conclusions

The main topic concerning this thesis is how the Norse myth is represented in contemporary videogames. In order to provide a clearer understanding, I have analyzed in the first chapters the Middle Ages, and explored the notion of the Medieval.

Eventually, thanks to the historiographical studies by Kellyann Fitzpatrick in *Neomedievalism*, I have been able to illustrate some of the methods I have used to study the case of the *Santa Monica Studio's* videogame *God of War (2018)* within the medieval Scandinavian setting. In order to do so, I have further provided the notion of myth, looking at the most significant features, themes and characters related to mythology in general, comparing Greek and Norse cultures.

Studies involving the art of storytelling and adaptation, such as *A Companion to Literature, Film, and Adaptation* (Cartmell, 2002) and *The Ape That Lived to Tell the Tale. The Evolution of the Art of Storytelling and Its Relationship to Mental Time Travel and Theory of Mind* (Garcia-Pelegrin, 2021), present the criteria and methods through which I have conducted this thesis. Thanks to these studies, I have been able to look into the most significant works of adaptation during the centuries, exploring literary sources followed by their later reconstructions in different fields, such as comics, movies, and finally videogames.

In chapter 4, after the introduction of the videogame, I have been studying, by means of a comparative analysis, the theme of Time, focusing on some characters such as Tyr and Mimir, and unique elements related to Scandinavian culture like runes.

As conclusions, we can confirm that videogames like *God of War (2018)*, opposed to other adaptable fields, not only tell us stories, but let us decide how we are going to experience that story, firstly, by letting us choose the difficulty of the gameplay, whether the player wants to enjoy the story or to be challenged by it; and secondly, by letting us choose which place to explore, which mission to play first or how to upgrade the gear. These are all decisions that the player is

allowed to make without changing the main story and its outcome, providing a unique experience for each player, while listening to the same story as every player does.

The audience has also the art of storytelling offered by the role that Mimir plays during the whole gameplay, always keeping alive the interest in Norse culture and mythology. This feature gives a great contribution to the Scandinavian culture and its acknowledgement, which major issue has always been its scarceness of works and publications of any form, confronting it to the reputation that Greek culture has.

Norse mythology nowadays is receiving a significant amount of credit, considering how limited its sources are. We can therefore declare that the interest towards Scandinavian culture is increasing over the years, especially between the younger age group, thanks to its innovative and unique adaptations.

It has been announced that *God of War (2018)* will have his own sequel named *God of War: Ragnarök*, which will be launching by the end of 2022, making the audience even more enthusiastic about the story. Further elements and characters related to the Norse myths will appear, gods like Thor and Odin, including Asgard and other realms. This new work will be of great benefit to the videogames adaptations industry as well as for the acknowledgment Norse culture, as it already has been proven by this study that it contributes to both industries simultaneously.

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Summary in Italian

L'elaborato è stato redatto con lo scopo di fornire nozioni comparative riguardanti la ricostruzione dei miti nordici in ambito videoludico, facendo appello al caso studio del gioco *God of War (2018)*.

Tale elaborato bibliografico, tramite ricerche approfondite negli ambiti storiografici specializzati nel medievalismo e neomedievalismo a cura di Kellyann Fitzpatrick, fornisce una serie di informazioni iniziali riguardanti gli studi eseguiti in campo medievale, per poter avere una prospettiva più ampia di ciò che si andrà ad analizzare in seguito.

Viene, quindi, introdotto il concetto di mito, del quale si approfondisce l'evoluzione col passare dei secoli ponendo a confronto varie culture e aree geografiche e focalizzandosi sempre più verso il mondo scandinavo. In seguito, grazie allo studio di Gianna Chiesa Isnardi con *I Miti Nordici*, si definisce il ruolo delle Rune nella cultura scandinava, essendo essa una forma di scrittura unica e ancora oggi difficile da tradurre.

Di conseguenza, per poter proseguire con l'introduzione all'analisi comparativa, tramite le ricerche di Garcia-Pelegrin Enrique in ambito psicologico, vengono fornite ulteriori nozioni riguardanti le forme di Storytelling e il suo impatto sull'uomo sempre più evoluto. Vengono descritte poi la cultura scandinava e vichinga basate sull'oralità, con un'introduzione alle scritture tardiva, a differenza di altre culture aventi già documentazioni scritte di alto livello. Si analizzano, in seguito, varie forme di riadattamento e Storytelling, andando a focalizzare l'attenzione sull'ambito mitologico scandinavo.

Per poter analizzare con più precisione quest'ultimo aspetto, ho analizzato i vari criteri e principi del riadattamento di opere letterarie e miti, mettendo in luce aspetti sociali, psicologici ed economici, oltre che l'attenzione agli aspetti culturali. In seguito, facendo appello a numerosi autori quali Snorri Sturluson, Neil Gaiman, Stan Lee, e altri pilastri del riadattamento della mitologia nordica in epoca moderna e contemporanea, Tramite i loro più grandi lavori, da *l'Edda Poetica* e

l'Edda in Prosa fino a *American Gods*, vediamo il progresso che il riadattamento dei miti scandinavi ha avuto col passare degli anni.

Da qui si può introdurre un'analisi del mito più approfondita in ambito videoludico, prendendo come principale caso studio il videogioco sviluppato dalla *Santa Monica Studio* *God of War* (2018).

Dopo un'accurata introduzione del videogioco e della sua trama, vengono analizzate diverse figure quali alcuni personaggi principali della storia, proseguendo con un'ulteriore analisi del tema temporale e della funzione delle rune all'interno del gioco stesso. Osservando in maniera sempre più dettagliata i soggetti studiati, si possono dedurre, tramite le teorie affrontate nei primi capitoli, quali fossero state le scelte di riadattamento a partire dalle fonti originali rappresentati i miti nordici principali ricorrenti nel gioco.

Infine, possiamo trarre diverse conclusioni, supponendo le motivazioni delle diverse scelte di ricostruzione del mito adottate dalla *Santa Monica Studio* per *God of War* (2018). Si dimostra, quindi, utilizzando i vari studi forniti nei primi capitoli della tesi, come gli sviluppatori abbiano applicato al gioco una prospettiva unica sui miti nordici, non solo per l'inversione dei ruoli di protagonismo e antagonismo che alcuni personaggi assumono in confronto con le fonti originali, ma per l'attenzione ai dettagli, resi interagibili col giocatore grazie ai nuovi sistemi di storytelling e adattamento in ambito videoludico.