LUDOS IN MYTHOS: *GOD OF WAR* AND THE SUBVERSION OF SNORRI

LUDOS IN MYTHOS: *GOD OF WAR* Y LA SUBVERSIÓN DE SNORRI

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Abstract: This article analyses the reception and transformation of Norse mythology from its medieval literary sources into the game world of *God of War* (2018), which marks a stark departure from the norm for the long-running Sony PlayStation franchise. This shift in cultural repertoire also carries with it important changes for the game's characters and the behaviors they embody, which are argued to reflect modern social discourses around race, gender, colonialism, and parenthood. In order to communicate this understanding of the game and its complex and fastidious use of the Norse mythological sources, a brief summary of the game narrative is followed by a discussion of recent work in Old Norse scholarship that has drawn attention to the political agenda of Snorri Sturluson, 13th century Icelandic chieftain and accredited compiler of the *Prose Edda*, which strongly influenced his presentation of the pre-Christian Scandinavian mythological material and thus our modern understanding of the mythos. Further reference is made to scholarship on the myths, particularly on the *jötnar*, the "giants," who are central to the both the mythology and *God of War*. The analysis then argues how the game's adaptation of Norse mythology subverts its unitary presentation in the *Prose Edda*, drawing into relief certain themes which reflect modern sentiments and concerns.

Keywords: Old Norse mythology, video game studies, literary studies, reception studies

Resumen: El presente artículo analiza la recepción y la transformación de las fuentes textuales mitológicas nórdicas en el videojuego *God of War* (2018), entrega de la establecida saga de videojuegos para Sony PlayStation que representa un cambio con respecto al repertorio cultural habitual de sus otras entregas. Se argumenta pues que las alteraciones acarreadas por sus personajes y las actitudes que personifican pueden ser entendidas como reflejos de discursos sociales contemporáneos por lo que hace a la raza, el género, el colonialismo, e incluso la paternidad. Por tal de argumentar en pro de este entendimiento del videojuego y su complejo y meticuloso uso de las fuentes mitológicas nórdicas, se provee un breve resumen de la narrativa del juego seguido de un estudio de fuentes académicas recientes que examinan el programa político de Snorri Sturlusson, *goði* islandés y supuesto recopilador de la *Edda*

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Prosaica, obra que presenta el material mitológico escandinavo precristiano, influenciada por los intereses políticos de su recopilador y que, a su vez, influye nuestro entendimiento de dichos mitos. Asimismo, se hace referencia a fuentes académicas que estudian la mitología, particularmente los *jötnar*, los "gigantes," figuras centrales tanto en los mitos como en la presentemente analizada entrega de *God of War*. El análisis que sigue sostiene que la adaptación de la mitología nórdica en el videojuego desmorona la visión unitaria de los mitos tal y como se presenta en la *Edda Prosaica*, poniendo de relieve ciertas temáticas que reflejan sentimientos y preocupaciones contemporáneas.

Palabras clave: Mitología nórdica, ludología, estudios literarios, estudios de recepción

Introduction

This article analyses the 2018 video game *God of War* from a literary studies perspective with an eye towards the medieval sources that the game draws upon in its creation of a unique digital world: Old Norse-Icelandic mythological literature. Since the series' inception in 2005, Santa Monica Studio's *God of War* franchise has been entirely based upon classical Greek mythology, with seven titles set in that narrative world. The most recent game surprised fans of the series by jumping from Greek to Norse mythology, a change which is emblematic of several developments both in the game and in the society and culture which enmeshes it. At the surface level, the change from Greek mythology to Norse mythology as the cultural basis on which to build the latest *God of War* is a sign of the times, as Old Norse culture and Vikings are enjoying a high degree of popularity that has surged over the past decade or so and continues going strong. It also points to a significant shift in direction the series is taking with regard to the behavior and depth of its characters, which in turn reflect current social discourses on important issues like race, gender, colonialism, and parenthood.

God of War uses its rewriting of Norse mythology as the vehicle for these discourses. This rewriting, or retextualization as I call it due to the transmedial[2] nature of the reception process, is complex and insightful, paying close attention to the detailed and intertwining (and

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[2] "Transmedia" refers to the use of multiple media platforms to tell a story, different aspects of that story, or different stories set in a single, often fictional, universe. The most popular example of this currently is the "Marvel cinematic universe," existing across TV shows, films, comics, video games, and more. For more on this concept, see for example Thon, 2016.

often contradictory) narratives found in the mythological sources. Like any text, *God of War* reflects the society and time in which it was created. In cases of reception and retextualization drawing consciously on a past corpus, this reflection becomes twofold: our perceptions of the past that is being transformed anew, and the embedding of contemporary mores and concerns into that past. By discussing the complex social history behind Snorri Sturluson's compilation of the *Prose Edda* and how his presentation of the material has fallen into doubt more recently, especially through recourse to the older material in the mythological poems and other evidence from the study of pre-Christian religions of the North, serious problems with the idea of a unified 'Norse mythology' arise. Being free from the baggage of a long history of scholarship attached to academic Old Norse studies, with many assumptions that have gone unquestioned for a long time, Santa Monica Studio was able to interact with the medieval literary sources more freely, though in translation, and arrived at their own conclusions that mirror more recent trends in the academic field, as will be shown.

The goal of this article is to shed light on *God of War* as a brilliant work of reception and adaptation that subverts the prevailing presentation of Norse mythology and creates a commentary on the cruel exercise of power, particularly as told through the genocide of the *jötnar*, the "giants" of Old Norse-Icelandic literature. The analysis here focuses on the concept of the Other and Othering, the negative process of self-identification through the labeling of some outside group or individual as "not us," inherently dehumanizing these outsiders through suppositions of superiority/inferiority. While the game's protagonists, and several other supporting characters, represent forms of Others as distinct from the ruling Æsir gods, the *jötnar* represent an Other that the Æsir have committed a genocidal conquest against, the most extreme result of the Othering process. Emphasis is put on these figures in both the medieval sources and their subversive re-presentation in *God of War*.

Subversion, ultimately, is the process and result of playing with texts and their meanings and of exploring possibilities, and by doing this, Santa Monica Studio has carried out the same form of rearranging and repurposing as Snorri did in compiling the *Prose Edda*. As mentioned, the shift to Norse mythology is a vehicle for change, for *God of War* in confronting and dealing with its own problematic past and that of its characters, and for the present society which is undergoing changes in public opinion on uncomfortable topics

present in the game. Lastly, as will be mentioned again, academic works on the reception of Old Norse culture rarely if ever mention video games, which, as a massive, global, new medium, carry cultural texts (including ones inspired by Old Norse, like *God of War*) in new forms to audiences the world over. Their evocative storytelling power and immersive potential should not be underestimated, and I hope this article highlights their significance for new phases of the reception of Old Norse culture to the wider academic field of pre-Modern Nordic studies.

In the following pages, after a summary of the necessary plot elements of the *God of War* series and the most recent game, I delve deeply into recent Old Norse scholarship surrounding the social and political context behind the mythological texts as we have them, as well as work that challenges several longstanding assumptions, particularly around the writing of Snorri Sturluson and perceptions of the *jötnar*. This is followed by analysis of the game and its remediation of the myths, and how this presents discourses of the Other which are particularly expressed in ideas of gender, (post)colonialism, and genocide, as well as other topics of contemporary importance such as parenting and toxic masculinity.

What is *God of War*? Description and Analytical Parameters

God of War (2018), the first game after a five-year gap, marks a stark departure from the norm for the series, exchanging its Greek mythological repertoire for a Norse one. The franchise's bread and butter has always been its larger-than-life action coupled with dramatic representations of Greek mythology, bringing the Classical stories of Olympian gods and mythical beasts to life (and then killing them brutally) in a new way by virtue of the unprecedented interactivity of video game technology. Players control the character of Kratos, a Spartan warrior and, as is later revealed, a son of Zeus, who is manipulated and betrayed by Ares in a narrative of epic tragedy that sets Kratos on a bloody path of vengeance against the gods. It belongs to the "hack and slash" game genre, defined by its fast-paced, combat oriented gameplay focused on melee weapons, but also has platforming and puzzle-solving elements. After seven games in this Greek mythological storyworld, both the fans and the developers of the franchise were eager for a change; in the "making-of" documentary *Raising Kratos*, lead

creative director Cory Barlog questioned whether Kratos was the mascot of the series, or was it Greek mythology? Taking an opportunity to radically alter the new game's setting and fiction, they kept Kratos but set him on a new journey in a completely new realm, that of Norse mythology.

The decision to bring Kratos head-to-head with Norse mythology has been a resounding success, with 2018's *God of War* becoming one of the highest rated titles on the PlayStation 4.[3] Beyond the simple explanation that the developers had created a great product, there are several other possible reasons for the game's success and rampant popularity. Chief among them, I argue, is the aforementioned wave of popularity that Old Norse culture and Vikings are enjoying in global entertainment industries as of late. In addition, Santa Monica Studio was able to carry over the themes, tone, and larger-than-life atmosphere and gameplay of *God of War*'s previous Greek era, which garnered its adoration by fans, into the Norse reimagining of the series. By establishing a new and quite different era of the *God of War* brand while maintaining narrative and tonal links with what made the series so successful in the past, the game's developers have both freed themselves of the threat of *God of War* becoming stale and overdone, and opened themselves and their characters up to new avenues of change and development. As I will demonstrate, *God of War* is a powerful example of the reception and remediation of a group of texts that inform our understanding of Norse mythology, and of the socially constitutive nature of the reception process. By portraying themes and topics that are of great concern to us (both "us" as the audience of the game and as the creators themselves, as much a part of society as we are) within the fantastical world of Norse mythology, texts such as *God of War* renegotiate our understandings both of this past and of ourselves in relation to it. I suggest further that this renegotiation of the past touches on subtle, complex aspects of Norse mythology that are usually ignored or smoothed over in popular adaptations, and in doing so finds fertile ground for reading these modern concerns into the medieval literary sources without seeming forced.

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[3] An aggregate of critic scores and player scores from *Metacritic.com* shows the game at 94/100, putting it at the number five spot in the highest rated PS4 games of all time, although it had the number one spot in 2018 when it released.

Overall, this effort results in a subversion of the sources, or rather of the traditional and prevailing manner of reading the sources as they appear to modern audiences (including scholars, for whom numerous, sometimes problematic assumptions from previous centuries of scholarship are only recently coming into question[4]). The key way in which this subversion plays out in *God of War*'s narrative and storyworld is through its construction of Otherness which creates a dichotomy between familiar and foreign. This finds expression in discourses of gender, race, ethnicity, and colonial domination. Tensions, contradictions, complexities, and subversions that obtain in the medieval literature translate well into the game's diegetic world, which deals with the problematic past of its own games and that of its protagonist Kratos as he faces the new challenge of fatherhood while navigating an unfamiliar world wrought with danger and menace.

Whereas much work has been done on the diverse post-medieval reception of Old Norse-Icelandic literature and culture into different media, such as theatre, music, comic books, literature (especially fantasy and historical fiction), film, and television, the new medium of video games has largely been neglected in this respect.[5] This is due in part to a lingering delineation between "high" and "low" culture and a continuing lack of social acceptance of video games' cultural value. Games and their associated industries, however, now exist globally on a scale that supersedes all other forms of entertainment media, and the play, interpretation, and reception of games makes up a significant portion of content on social media platforms like YouTube and Twitch. The still-young field of video game studies continues to proliferate as it accumulates new theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of this unique medium. The "old" of literary analysis, visual culture studies (including film and television studies), and other areas of cultural studies are brought into communion with the "new" aspects of the genre, such as the coding and logic behind the rule-generated, vivid worlds that are made possible by advanced computer graphics and interactive technology.[6] While video games are as much "texts" as the written texts of the

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[4] For instance, see van Nahl, 2020.

[5] Recent works on reception that exclude video games include Jón Karl Helgason, 2017; O'Donoghue, 2007; Clunies Ross (Ed.), 2018. Some exceptions exist as MA and PhD theses such as McPhaul, 2016 and Cooper, 2016, respectively.

[6] Formerly, there was a division in nascent game studies of the early 2000s between game formalists, "ludologists" and those who wanted to understand the storytelling potential of electronic games, or

medieval Icelandic prose and poetry that constitutes Old Norse literary culture, they draw upon and transform these sources into inherently modern forms. Here I mean text in the (post)structuralist sense, which posits that any cultural object that conveys meaning through systems of signs, of any media (visual, auditory, linguistic, literary, etc.), is a text. Video games constitute a new and interesting form of text whose foundation within digital platforms allows a more direct kind of interaction than was previously possible (through play and interaction, though a different kind of interaction than one has with a book or a theatre production obviously).

In addition to these media-level implications, they also change at the level of reception just as any other work that draws on the past, regardless of the medium of the new text, and create works that reflect the time and culture in which they were made: how that contextual society viewed the past in question, their relationship to that past, and the self-understanding or preoccupations of the society itself.[7] It is important to keep in mind the different contexts of creation between texts like *God of War*, which are made within the parameters of the gaming industry and culture and for entertainment purposes, and those like Old Norse-Icelandic literature, especially the sagas and poetry, which existed in a state of flux within oral culture for centuries before being committed to writing. Both forms of texts depict versions of pasts, in this case pasts which even overlap, but which were created in utterly remote social, temporal, and ideological contexts, as will be discussed, but are nevertheless both products of the reception process.

God of War is a vast work to consider, as a so-called AAA game (a game produced by a major game studio with a large production team, around three hundred people for *God of War*, and a multi-million-dollar budget) with an estimated thirty to fifty hours of content to explore, including all side quests and tasks (missions that are not critical to the central story of the

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"narratologists." This was largely irrelevant from its outset, as asserted by Murray (2005), and games are rather unique combinations both of their fictional, narrative elements and their formal, coded, mechanical ones. For seminal works in game studies representing both "sides" but which in turn move beyond this division, see Murray, 1997 and Juul, 2005.

[7] McPhaul, 2016, deals precisely with this notion, using sociological data gathered through online surveys to discuss the constructed "Viking Age proto-fictional universe" which comprises expected, desired, and undesired elements of a popularly-imagined Viking Age as remediated through modern fiction, with examples of two popular "indie" video games.

game) and collectibles acquisitions (of interest to "completionists," players who enjoy completing one hundred percent of a game's content). As such, my analysis here must be necessarily limited. I am unable to even deal with the totality of the game's use of Old Norse culture and aesthetics to fill and deepen the created world, not to speak of all the ludic potentials of exploration that any game offers. Instead, I focus here on the portrayal of the Other, how this relates to conventional interpretations of Old Norse mythological literature (and challenges thereof) and reveals the embedding of contemporary social concerns and ideas into this mythical past.

God of War and its Sources

Before discussing the latest game, I will briefly summarize the overarching plot of the first era of *God of War* games, which comprise the Greek mythological arc, to give context, background, and some of the themes that characterize the series. Kratos, as mentioned, was a skilled Spartan warrior and commander who promised servitude to the gods in exchange for victory. Kratos becomes bound to Ares, who seeks to mold him into the perfect agent of war and death on earth. To do this, Ares uses his powers to trick Kratos into killing his wife and daughter under a pall of rage and bloodlust, seeking to untether the Spartan from his earthly attachments. Ares' plan backfires, and Kratos is understandably ashamed and grief-stricken, and goes instead to serve the other gods in hopes of some atonement. Eventually, Athena tasks him with killing Ares, who is rampaging in Athens and has displeased the other Olympians with his recklessness. He succeeds in his vengeance and is granted Ares' former place as god of war but remains haunted by his sin. The cycle of betrayal and revenge begins again in *God of War II* (2007) when Kratos, following in the reckless footsteps of his predecessor and succumbing to rage, is tricked by Zeus and sapped of his godhood, killed, and dragged down to the Underworld. On the way down, he is saved by Gaia, who tells Kratos of her and the other titans' own betrayal by the gods, and counsels him to find the Sisters of Fate to change his fate of being killed by Zeus and turn the tables. Succeeding at this, he uses the power of the Fates to travel back in time and defeat Zeus, but before he can kill him, Athena sacrifices herself and takes the fatal sword blow in his place, since Zeus' death would mean the

destruction of all Olympus. As she lay dying, Athena reveals the reason for Zeus' betrayal of Kratos: Kratos was actually Zeus' son, and Zeus feared his son would usurp him like he usurped his own father, Cronos. Even further enraged, Kratos declares that the gods no longer deserve to exist or rule over Olympus and joins forces with the titans to bring an end to their cruel reign.

God of War III (2010) picks up exactly where the previous game ended with Kratos and the titans scaling Olympus to fight the gods. In the climactic end of the trilogy and the main arc of the Greek section of the franchise,[8] Kratos kills all the gods of Olympus as well as the titans, who betray Kratos after the initial skirmish, when Gaia reveals he was merely a pawn in their vengeance against Zeus. In killing the gods who ruled over the forces and phenomena of the world, the world falls apart and Kratos looks out upon the destroyed Greece from the peak of Olympus, his vengeance complete. Athena's spirit asks him to return the power of Pandora's Box, which is Hope as in the original myth, that had helped Kratos finally overcome his guilt. Kratos refuses, and stabs himself, unleashing the power of Hope into the world for mortals to have, and seemingly dies on a floor mural of a phoenix. In the post-credits scene, a trail of blood leads away and off the cliff of the mountain. Our present subject, *God of War* (2018), picks up an unspecified amount of time later, with Kratos in a much different, but still legendary and mythic realm, one based now on Old Norse-Icelandic mythological literature.

At the outset of the game, a visibly older Kratos is preparing the funeral pyre for his wife, Faye, who has passed away immediately prior to the depicted events of the game, and with whom he has a young son named Atreus. As the ending of *God of War III* implies, the power of Hope helped Kratos move beyond his guilt, and after leaving Greece and journeying far to the north, he felt ready enough to try having a family again. Father and son, who are shown to be very different and to not have much of a preexisting relationship from the outset, begin a journey to fulfill Faye's last wish of having her ashes scattered from the highest peak in all the realms, presumed to be the enormous mountain in the distance. Before they set out, they are attacked by a mysterious stranger with godly strength and invulnerability (later revealed to be Baldr), but Kratos fights him off and he and Atreus depart. Over the course of

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[8] The other four games that comprise the Greek era of the franchise are considered "side games," games that tell stories in between or before the major events of the three main games, *God of War I–III*.

an epic journey that takes the pair through many of the nine worlds of Norse mythography, encountering many characters, creatures, monsters, and foes (and a few friends) from across Old Norse-Icelandic literature, Kratos and Atreus struggle to connect to one another, overcome both their grief at Faye's passing and the many challenges they face, and discover secrets of both the past and future which will have a great impact on their lives, all while being hunted by the foreboding and cruel Æsir gods (mainly Thor and Odin and their sons, Magni and Módi, and Baldr). With help from Mímir and the "Witch of the Wood" who turns out to be Freyja, Kratos and Atreus eventually reach Jötunheim, where the true highest peak of all the worlds is, and where it is revealed that Faye was really a *jötunn*, making Atreus half god and half *jötunn*. Finally reconciled, the father and son spread Faye's ashes from the peak of all Jötunheim, amidst a field of dead, mountain-like *jötnar*, and return through the realm portal to Midgard. However, they know there will be consequences to their actions, including the killing of both Magni and Módi, and finally their relentless pursuer Baldr, and a post-credits cutscene shows a robed figure bearing Mjöllnir arriving to confront them amidst thunder, lightning, wind and snow, setting the stage for the upcoming sequel *God of War: Ragnarök*.[9] This is, of course, a skeletal synopsis of the game's story, and much of the narrative surrounds the tension between Kratos and his past which rears its head both spectrally (such as visions of Athena's spirit) and in his desire to keep his son from treading the same path of rage and revenge that he treaded earlier. These themes will be returned to later in the analysis.

God of War takes place in Midgard, an anglicized version of the Old Norse-Icelandic *Miðgarðr* or "middle enclosure" (the Middle Earth of Tolkien), the realm of mortals including humanity. Miðgarðr, however, was also populated with all sorts of supernatural creatures, both friendly and fiendish, particularly in medieval literary genres like the *fornaldarsögur* and *riddarasögur*,[10] but even the *Íslendingasögur*, the Sagas of Icelanders, traditionally known for their sense of realism and sober narrative style, are full of elements of the fantastic, from

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[9] During the process of revising and correcting this article, this title was confirmed along with the release of gameplay footage and pictures of new characters (and returning ones). The snow that begins to fall signals the beginning of *fimbulvetr*, the "mighty winter" that will precede Ragnarök.

[10] "Legendary sagas" and "sagas of knights," respectively, both of which were hybridized genres blended with continental elements, particularly French romance. These generic distinctions are modern, scholarly inventions and did not exist in medieval Iceland as such. Further, both are "late" genres (later than the 13th century compositions, considered the high point of saga composition by earlier schools of Icelandic literary criticism) and overlap considerably.

draugar to prophetic dreams and magic.[11] All of this, and much more, carries over into the vision of the northern mythological realm that is realized in *God of War*'s presentation of Midgard, an austere realm full of monsters, magical beings, and imposing cosmic forces for the player, as Kratos, to contend with.

But what of the sources for this mythological material that is brought to life so vividly in video games, not only in *God of War* but in numerous other games[12] across the decades since the medium's nascence? Norse mythology as we know it is contained almost entirely in two texts from thirteenth-century Iceland: the *Prose Edda* attributed to Snorri Sturluson and the *Poetic Edda* of unknown exact provenance. Supplementary information comes from sagas and surrounding literary corpora of medieval Iceland, such as skaldic poetry and texts like *Heimskringla*, which are sometimes (though less-frequently than the *Eddas*) drawn upon to flesh out the worlds of these games. For much of the existence of academic Old Norse studies, the *Eddas* were taken by many scholars to be a window into pre-Christian Scandinavian religion and belief. These texts, however, describe events and myths many centuries removed from the time of their recording, and although there is evidence for genuine pre-Christian dates for some of the subject matter of the Eddic poems,[13] they were regardless compiled into their present state by Christian Icelanders centuries after Christianization.[14] The past several decades have been a period of rather dramatic change for Old Norse studies, and with the broader humanities, as the "social turn" has brought numerous new perspectives and theoretical tools to bear on these subjects, as well as drawing the different disciplines into closer cooperation with one another to elucidate new ways of reading this past.[15]

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[11] On the paranormal/fantastic in *Íslendingasögur*, see Arngrímur Vídalín, 2012; Ármann Jakobsson and Mirriam Mayburd, 2020; Ármann Jakobsson, 2011 & 2017.

[12] For example, though certainly not an exhaustive list, *Rune* (2000), *Age of Mythology* (2002), *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011), *Jotun* (2015), *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (2017), *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* (2020). Hundreds of other games in the medieval fantasy genre could also be considered due to the instrumentality of Tolkien's writing in creating the standard forms and features of the genre, which was in turn heavily based in Norse, Anglo-Saxon, Celtic, and Finnish mythology and folklore.

[13] In addition to the supposition of pre-Christian dating for the mythological poems, important sources of the skaldic poetical corpus are also included in the *Prose Edda* (especially *Skáldskaparmál* and *Háttatal*) and in *Heimskringla*, which significantly is also attributed to Snorri Sturluson.

[14] For example, see McKinnel, 2008; Thorvaldsen, 2016; Whaley, 2005.

[15] Also called the "cultural turn," this refers to a turn in the latter half of the twentieth century in the disciplines of the humanities and social sciences away from positivist understandings of history and

An important result of this turn within the field of Old Norse studies for the topic at hand is the growing distrust of Snorri Sturluson's account of pre-Christian mythology and cosmology. This distrust is grounded in examinations of the political interests that informed his scholarly pursuits, particularly in the compiling of the *Prose Edda*, but also in the creation of *Heimskringla*. Snorri Sturluson was a chieftain in thirteenth-century Iceland, a particularly powerful and important one at that, born into the prodigious Sturlung family and very well educated from a young age, and whose literary efforts have been recontextualized by investigations into his ambitious political goals in Iceland and abroad in the Norwegian royal court. His attributed writings, the *Prose Edda* and *Heimskingla,* are learned treatises concerning, respectively, pre-Christian myths and their supposed origins as they relate to the art of skaldic poetry, and the legendary genealogies and histories of the continental Scandinavian royal lineages. Of particular relevance is the work of scholars such as Kevin J. Wanner and Torfi Tulinius, whose application of French sociological theory to the study of the sagas and *Eddas*, particularly the work of Pierre Bourdieu, has produced important new understandings of the social and political realities behind the production of these texts. Scholars of religion, such as Terry Gunnell, have also advocated questioning the presentation of the mythology given in Snorri's *Edda*, which is supported in particular by Wanner's findings in his 2008 book, *Snorri Sturluson and the Edda: The Conversion of Cultural Capital in Medieval Scandinavia*.

Touching briefly upon Bourdieu, Wanner looks at thirteenth-century Icelandic society through the lens of Bourdieu's theory of capital. This idea of capital is a sociological model that observes the exchanges and fluctuations of power amongst actors and various social spheres as forms of resources thusly: economic capital, cultural capital, social capital, and symbolic capital, the latter of which "…is the form that the various species of capital assume when they are perceived and recognized as legitimate" (Bourdieu, 1989, p. 17). Symbolic capital in Iceland took the form of the *goðorð*, the office of a *goði* or "chieftain," and was thus political in nature, substantiated by the number of *þingmenn*, loyal supporters, that a *goði* had.

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human civilization and towards the creation of culture and meaning and the everyday lived experiences of common people as the foci of inquiry. Examples are the use of theories from Marxism, post-structuralism, gender and queer studies, and other ways of reading "against the grain" of pre-established historiographical hegemonies, as well as an increase in interdisciplinarity in the human sciences.

It also, importantly, took the form of support from continental rulers, as I shall shortly describe. Chieftains could even obtain more than one *goðorð*, as did Snorri, through marriage and shrewd legal maneuvering, which is representative of cultural capital (Wanner, 2008, pp. 28–29, pp. 41–48). Knowledge of the law was critical for *goðar* to navigate political society, as lawsuits were one of the major arenas in which honor was won or lost, and Snorri was evidently quite gifted in law as is demonstrated by his election to the office of Lawspeaker (*lögsögumaðr*) of the Icelandic *alþing* (Tulinius, 2009, p. 58).

As we know, Snorri's cultural capital extended beyond knowledge and skill in the law and into the poetic and literary realm, gaining proficiency in skaldic poetry, complex and convoluted in metre and form and esoteric in content (the latter especially so in the Christian era). Its use of kennings and *heiti*, the central conventions of skaldic diction, relied on knowledge of mythology drawn from the pre-Christian past in order to transmit the meaning of its poetical restatement (in order to know that "Kvasir's blood" is a kenning for the art of poetry, one has to know first who Kvasir is and the story of his blood's significance). Wanner posits that the *Prose Edda* was compiled for the purpose of reinvigorating interest in skaldic poetry, both in Iceland and abroad, where its standing as an important social and cultural artform was swiftly fading (Wanner, 2008, p. 75); it was in essence a handbook of skaldic poetry, providing details on the rules of metrics and alliteration as well as the mythological lore needed to understand and fashion kennings, with examples in action. As Wanner argues a step further, the composition of the *Prose Edda* was also a part of Snorri's political ambitions among the Norwegian aristocracy (something also apparent in *Heimskringla*) using the figure of Óðinn, to whom he and all poets owe their skills and whose purported descendants were the contemporary ruling families of Scandinavia (Cf. Faulkes, 1983), as a marker of cultural legitimacy (Wanner, 2008, p. 139 & 146).

Briefly, skaldic poetry's function in elite Scandinavian society was essentially propagandistic and mytho-historical in scope. In pre-literate societies, oral lore is the main avenue of storing information (through the formulaic and mnemonic structures of poetry, for instance), and skaldic poetry combined this aspect with genealogical links to ancient kings and

from them to gods, usually praising or elegizing the elite subjects of the poem.[16] It arose in the 9th century in Norway "when an ascendant elite had required cultural products to naturalize its rising status" (Wanner, 2008, p. 66), yet by the 10th century nearly all skaldic poets in Norway's elite circles were Icelandic.[17] Skaldic poetry's functions as both a producer of cultural legitimacy and a form of capital that Icelandic poets depended on in order to generate other forms of capital abroad, particularly in Norway, was eroded in the thirteenth century by, among other factors, Scandinavian kingship's turn to ecclesiastical authority to invest kings with legitimacy and the influx of continental literary genres (principally romance and its chivalric ethos) and metres (such as the French *danz*, a much simpler metre than those used in skaldic poetry). Furthermore, its capacity to store historical information was quickly supplanted by literacy's ascendancy in the North (Wanner, 2008, p. 92). These historical processes and events, coupled with Norway's king at this time, Hákon Hákonarson, who was consciously emulating continental modes of kingship and fostering communication with foreign courts, doomed Snorri's project to revitalize the function of skaldic poetry before it began. However, his literary works had many farther-reaching effects: his presentation of Norse mythology echoes into the modern day, giving us a certain view of the material that we have extrapolated into a broad understanding of pre-Christian Scandinavia as a whole, yet which traces its *raison d'être* to the political machinations of a single, Christian Icelander.

Terry Gunnell has advocated for an inherent distrust of Snorri's portrayal of pre-Christian Nordic religion based on similar grounds, citing the agenda apparent in *Heimskringla* and the *Prose Edda* that explains his focus on Óðinn as both the leader of a Nordic pantheon of gods and also their "Allfather" (Gunnell, 2017, p. 117 & p. 121). In several articles, Gunnell challenges the very assumption that there was a unified Nordic pantheon at all in the pre-Christian North and shows how much finagling, re-arranging, and selection Snorri had to carry out to try and synthesize a coherent narrative from the often-contradictory Eddic poems

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[16] Skaldic poetry was also quoted extensively in prose saga writing and Norse histories mainly in two ways: as dialogue and as corroboratory evidence of historical events, both of which underlie the authority and truthfulness attributed to skaldic verses by medieval Scandinavian peoples. This is discussed in depth in the first chapter of O'Donoghue, 2005.

[17] Wanner argues that this Icelandic monopolization of court poetry was a way to take control of a high-value form of cultural capital in West Norse society to counteract the dominance of Norway in most other forms of economic and political resources (Wanner, 2008, pp. 57-58).

(Gunnell, 2007, pp. 113–116; Gunnell, 2015; Gunnell, 2017). Gunnell counters this portrayal through reference to a myriad of studies relating to the pluralistic, non-centralized nature of pre-Christian religions of the North, as well as numerous sagas and other medieval Scandinavian literary sources, to paint a much different picture than that which Snorri presents. He reveals that it is overwhelmingly evident that the worship of Óðinn as a head deity was limited to a few areas in southern Scandinavia (Denmark in particular), whereas in Sweden, Norway, and especially Iceland, Þórr and Freyr were much more often the principal deities of devotion. This is not surprising, as most people in the Nordic regions were farmers, so what need had they for a traveling, mischievous god of death, battle, poetry, and magic? Þórr and Freyr, on the other hand, had strong links to the land, fertility, the weather, travel, protection, hallowing (for instance, of marriages), beasts of burden and livestock, horses, and many more things the average person would be concerned with in Iron Age Scandinavian societies. This is also reflected clearly in the illuminating toponymical study conducted by Stefan Brink, which shows the geographic distribution of place names that combine the names of pre-Christian Norse deities with words like -*vé* ("sacred place, sanctuary") or -*salr* ("hall, building"). The results of Brink's study align quite closely with the distribution of worship depicted in both the sagas[18] and in historiographical works like *Heimskringla* and Saxo Grammaticus' *Gesta Danorum* (Brink, 2007; Gunnell, 2017).

All of this is to say that Snorri had an agenda. Whether we take that he authored the *Prose Edda* himself or had it compiled, he clearly had a significant degree of oversight in both its portrayal of the myth stories and its careful arrangement and editing of available material, and that these efforts were directed toward his political and social goals in Iceland and at the Norwegian court. The work of scholars like Gunnell, Margaret Clunies Ross, Thomas DuBois, and others who have questioned long-held preconceptions about the unified nature of pre-Christian Nordic religion has encouraged others to take a closer look at how Snorri's influence has colored modern perceptions of specific elements and figures of Old Norse myth and religions. I will now turn to one such study on the *jötnar*, as the *jötnar* play a major role in *God*

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[18] Gunnell (2017) refers especially to *Landnámabók* and *Íslendingabók*, but also *Ynglinga saga* and others such as *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Víga-Glúms saga*, *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, *Ógmundar þáttr dytts*, *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta* (as well as Snorri's version in *Heimskringla*), and *Óláfs saga Helga*.

of War's world, story, and character arcs, which were adapted directly from the myths. The study presents an in-depth analysis of the *jötnar* as an essential feature of Old Norse mythology, but one that is often mischaracterized both within academia and in the minds of the public.

The *Jötnar* in Focus

God of War (2018)'s representation of the "giants" reflects ambiguities in the medieval texts that feature, describe, or reference *jötnar* as well as more recent scholarly treatments of these elusive figures which have broken with older academic assumptions built on binary categories from structural anthropology of religion (especially comparative religions). In particular to the latter development, the dissertation of Ingunn Ásdísardóttir, *Jötnar in War and Peace*, completed in 2018, analyzes the totality of evidence for the nature and function of the *jötnar* from their perspective, attempting to circumvent the "pro-Æsir" viewpoint of most of the mythological texts, in particular Snorri's *Edda*, and thus arrive at new conclusions about the *jötnar*.[19] Ingunn summarizes the previous scholarship on *jötnar* and finds that nearly all works either failed to approach them as the focus of a dedicated study on their own terms and not in relation to other mythological beings (especially the Æsir), or came to the oft-repeated conclusion that the "giants" (as the *jötnar* continue to be inaccurately conflated with) are symbols of chaos, death, and destruction and are structurally opposed to the gods and humans, and are thus 'evil' (Ingunn Ásdísardóttir, 2018, pp. 7–8).[20] It is a remarkable synchronicity of social attitudes and mores with respect to the reception and reuse of heroic and mythic pasts that both Ingunn's dissertation and *God of War* were published in 2018, both

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[19] The idea of the sources as being pro-Æsir, and thus pro-humanity as they are socio-culturally grouped together as an "us" versus the "them" of *jötnar*, and of other monstrous figures, is discussed in Clunies Ross, 1994, pp. 41–84.

[20] On pp. 31–32, Ingunn discusses the late twentieth century work of Lotte Motz who is unique in writing on issues concerning the *jötnar* and *jötunn*-women as the focus of several articles, theorizing that they were worshipped in a now-lost tradition of Nordic nature religion. However, even Motz maintains that the *jötnar* took on the role of evil enemies of the gods in the later mythology. More recently some works, though piecemeal, have approached the *jötnar* in more nuanced ways that differ from the older characterizations of them as evil and chaotic which were largely informed by their depiction in *Völuspá* and Snorri's *Edda*.

of which feature a re-examination of the relationship between Norse mythological beings with a focus on complicating and subverting the antagonism between the *jötnar* and the Æsir (and Vanir).

Snorri's *Edda* clearly conveys a dim view of the *jötnar* in the mythology, casting them as both enemies of the gods (and thus of humans also) and as explicitly evil beings [*Hann var illr ok allir hans ættmen* ("He [Ymir] was evil, as were all of his kinsmen/descendants," *Gylfaginning* 5[21])]. As Ingunn highlights, Snorri (or his scribes) "rarely if ever uses the positive adjectives so frequently applied in Eddic poetry to the characteristics of the *jötnar*, such as *vís, fróðr, aldinn, forn*" (Ingunn Ásdísardóttir, 2018, p. 204). Aside from his political agenda evident in the creation of both the *Edda* and *Heimskringla*, Snorri's Christian perspective can also be detected in his narrativization and alteration of the mythic material, such as Clunies Ross has argued (Clunies Ross, 1994, p. 33). This manifests in narrative strategies such as the Prologue's euhemerization of the Æsir into magician-kings from Troy and *Gylfaginning*'s frame narrative that explains its proceeding myth stories and cosmogony as the Æsir using their trickery to create illusions that delude King Gylfi, who then spreads the pagan religion on his return to Sweden. Clunies Ross has also posited that the stories of Snorri's *Edda* are structured narratively like wonder tales[22] to stress their nature as "mythological fictions" to its audience (Clunies Ross, 1992, pp. 209–213). Further, Snorri attempted to present a coherent mythology out of what are in reality disparate, often-contradictory stories, as well as portraying the Æsir as a united pantheon (as Gunnell dismisses, in the above section). These and other aspects of the text of *Snorra Edda* further illustrate how the compilation of these many myth stories and their transformation into prose (or prosimetrum, considering the many quotations of Eddic poetry, especially the heavy reliance on *Völuspá* in *Gylfaginning*) involved a great deal of

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[21] All references to the *Prose Edda* are from Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Prologue and Gylfaginning,* FAULKES, Anthony (Ed.) (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2005). Ymir is significant here as the first sentient being in the cosmos and the progenitor of the *jötnar*. Hence by calling his descendants evil the text declares all *jötnar* to be evil. Translation is my own.

[22] Wonder tales, or medieval *fabula*, are folktales of strange and often magical things, and usually concern far away, "exotic" places which fascinated medieval audiences. So Clunies Ross is arguing here that the similarity in narrative structure between the *Edda*'s mythological fictions and the *fabula* may have signaled the remote past to be like a distant, alien place where fantastical things were possible. This idea is mirrored, for instance, in *fornaldarsögur* which deal with legendary heroes, gods, magic, and monsters placed in the remote, pre-Christian past.

editing, alteration, omission, selection, and arrangement, not to mention the complex epistemological and semantic work carried out by the frame narrative and the Prologue. Techniques of textual editing and compilation are inherently the products of interest and agenda, and in *Snorra Edda* they have been shown to reflect the religious, cultural, and social context of thirteenth-century Christian Icelandic elites, as well as the political ambition of Snorri Sturluson in particular with his interests in maintaining the cultural legitimacy and value of skaldic poetry and aligning himself to the upper echelons of Norwegian courtly society.

A major thread in the presentation of Norse mythology given in *Snorra Edda* is its eschatological alignment of the myths and the relationships between beings—the "us" versus "them," "good" versus "evil"—that places *jötnar* in opposition to gods and humans. While the Eddic poem *Völuspá*, "the Seeress's Prophecy," one of Snorri's most heavily-quoted sources for mythological information, especially about Ragnarök, does describe *jötnar* who come to battle the Æsir and who birth some of the monsters that destroy the world, their portrayal in the majority of the other Eddic poems varies quite widely, and many such descriptions of *jötnar* describe them in a way that places them on equal footing with gods, both Vanir and Æsir; while there is antagonism, there is rather more interdependence between these groups which are depicted antipodally in *Snorra Edda*. While many scholars who carried assumptions of structural dualism in Norse mythology have described the conflicts between Æsir and *jötnar* as the prime mover of action in the myths, Ingunn posits that "it might be said that contact and communication rather than antagonism between the gods and the *jötnar* seems to be the driving force of Old Norse mythology" (Ingunn Ásdísardóttir, 2018, p. 241). Significantly, Ingunn further asserts that "…while some antagonism may exist between the two parties in various cases (as Snorri suggests), it seems evident that the friction that lies behind the conflict that occurs is more often shown to be instigated by the gods than by the *jötnar*, who, in general, seem to receive the visiting gods quite cordially" (Ingunn Ásdísardóttir, 2018, p. 241). As will be shown, *God of War*'s developers and writers evidently elucidate some of these features, either through close or subversive reading of the mythological literary sources, to create a world based on Old Norse mythology which aligns with the franchise's overarching portrayal of gods as cruel, tyrannical, inured to (or indeed gaining a twisted pleasure from) the suffering

of others, especially those they deem beneath their lofty status as gods, and thus also supremacist, arrogant, racist or xenophobic, and in the case of the *jötnar*, genocidal.[23] Even in the Greek-centered *God of War* titles, most of the titans are imprisoned rather than outright killed, but in the new Norse iteration, the Æsir seem hell-bent on the complete eradication of the *jötnar* in their bid for control of all nine worlds.

The Other and aspects of alterity have always existed in human societies, but this warrants a closer look with regard to the medieval North before returning to the game's representations of this phenomenon. Sirpa Aalto (2010) analyzes ethnic in-group/out-group (self-Other) identification in the major compendia of kings' sagas (the period of composition of which coincides with that of *Snorra-Edda*), seeking to understand how the image of Otherness reflects the thirteenth-century Norse-Icelandic mental worldview. In Aalto's understanding of this proposed common Norse-Icelandic cultural sphere and identity (in a looser sense than its modern connotations, before nations and national consciousness), established through commonality of language, cultural and social structures, and geographical proximity, the degrees of difference and Otherness displayed in *God of War* can be said to mirror the mentality of thirteenth-century Norse-Icelandic ethnic identification of self and not-self. The *jötnar* are an Other group from the standpoint of the Æsir, the dominant group in the region and the "good guys" in the sources as mentioned before, distinguished by language, customs, conduct (i.e., goals of peace/neutrality, ideals, and social obligations), abilities, and, in the fantasy-mythological sense, they are distinct "races" of beings (although they can bear children together[24]).

The *jötnar* share close ties with the Æsir, those of kinship, marriage, and trade, yet also in the forms of conflict, plunder, rape, and domination (the negative relations are more pronounced in *God of War*, as mentioned). In the game's depiction of the mythology, the *jötnar* have become an obstacle (and object) of the imperial ambitions of Odin and the Æsir, and

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[23] The exception to this portrayal is *God of War*'s version of Týr, who constantly pushes for peace and was a friend and ally of the *jötnar* and was beloved by everyone in Midgard. He is missing at the time of the game's action, presumed to be killed by Odin, whose plans Týr was always ruining with his peaceful ways. Only recently, news and trailers for the sequel, *God of War: Ragnarök*, have been released which show that Týr is alive and will likely play a major role in the story.

[24] On the concept of race in medieval fantasy video games and its difference from real-world usages of the term, see for instance Poor, 2012.

where they once intermarried (even Odin) and had peace with the *jötnar*, they are considered Other enough to the Æsir for the latter to consider total eradication as an acceptable course of action to achieve their goals. The Otherness of the *jötnar* can also be interpreted through a colonial lens. In her analysis, Aalto discusses the Sámi (referred to as *finnar* in the sagas) and their possible analogical connection to the *jötnar* and trolls, mythological and folkloric Others that offered convenient parallel images to the pagan Sámi "from the viewpoint of the Church and the king" (Aalto, 2010, p. 133), especially considering their wider reputation for magic and geographical situation in the North. This connection was also pursued by Else Mundal, who explores the close literary associations between Sámi peoples and *jötnar*, finding a strong parallel especially in instances of marriage (a function which characterizes both myths of *jötnar* and stories of *finnar/finnkonur* in the sagas) (Mundal, 2000, pp. 354–355).

This line of thinking about Norse-Icelandic self-Other group identification concerning northern neighboring Sámi peoples and their mythological analogues of *jötnar* allows for a postcolonial[25] perspective on the power relations between these groups, distinctly negative aspects of which are carried over into *God of War*. Despite the anachronistic nature of talking about colonialism in the medieval past,[26] this is less about historicity and more about the sociological aspects of the reception of the past (more specifically the literature and mythology of a past culture), i.e., the way in which these depictions are perceived by modern audiences. In a game depicting the violent conquest, oppression, genocide, and theft of resources of a peaceful, marginalized group by a dominant, hegemonic one, an audience today will almost certainly understand this in a colonial sense, at least to a certain degree, given the global discourses currently ongoing in reaction against the colonial imperialism of early and late modernity (as well as its successor, neocolonialism). The Other status of the *finnar* in the medieval literature, though certainly unable to be categorized as colonized in the Viking Age and medieval period, is paralleled by their colonial dispossession and marginalization in early

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[25] The term "postcolonialism," or postcolonial studies, refers to the study of the consequences and legacy of colonialism and imperialism, as well as the ideological reaction against them in broader social discourse. The prefix "post-" does not indicate a system *after* colonialism, but rather, like the term postmodernism (with which it shares several approaches), it is meant as a reaction to colonial imperialism, focusing critical theories on the human cost and its enduring cultural, social, and economic effects.

[26] For an example on the application of postcolonial theory to the Nordic Middle Ages, see Sif Rikhardsdottir, 2008.

modernity and into the present day, something which has only been recategorized as colonization in more recent decades. Scholars such as Kaius Tuori have shown how the common legal arguments and ideological underpinnings of colonial imperial projects of European (and North American) powers corresponded to those motivating the Scandinavian states' reduction of Sámi peoples' land and rights, and Carl-Gösta Ojala and Jonas Nordin have discussed the present-day private and state-sponsored mining operations in Sápmi in similar historical contexts of colonialism and in light of issues of indigenous archaeology and heritage (Tuori, 2015, pp. 153–156; Ojala and Nordin, 2015, pp. 6–21). In particular, the "pervasive intellectual foundation behind indigenous dispossession, namely that of the historical idea of progress and civilization" (Tuori, 2015, p. 154), which was used to categorize Other groups, such as nomadic, non-Christian peoples as the Sámi were, as savage and uncivilized, resonates with Snorri's portrayal of the *jötnar* as evil, uncivilized beings (which can be understood as a product of his Christian worldview to an extent) as well as their nineteenth century academic interpretation as forces of chaos and destruction. I return to this topic later on, in the following section of the article.

God of War's developers at Studio Santa Monica tapped into the ambiguities and potential counter-narratives within the literature featuring *jötnar* and within Snorri's *Edda* in particular, vindicating them from their simplified, generalized status as the 'evil' opponents of the gods who seek to unravel creation in the final cataclysmic events of Ragnarök. Instead, it is the Æsir who are the aggressors, betrayers, and oath-breakers in their dealings (as Ingunn argues is the case in the literature), not only with the *jötnar*, but with all the mythological beings in Norse mythology who are reimagined in *God of War*. This is not the first time the Æsir have been cast or recast as cruel and tyrannical gods in post-medieval depictions of Norse culture, and lately there may be something of a turn in popular culture towards this portrayal. However, in *God of War*, this characterization of the Æsir fits both the franchise's earlier depiction of deities as cruel and petty as well as the recent problematization of the relations between mythic beings in the Norse mythological corpus by scholars, demonstrated above. As summarized, *God of War*'s previous titles told an epic tragedy which followed Kratos through a fictional Greek mythological world where players would guide him on a brutal, bloody journey of hypermasculine, self-versus-all excess against monsters, legends, and other figures

from Classical mythology. Principally, though, Kratos' journey was one of revenge against the devious and corrupt Olympian gods. In the 2018 *God of War* game, Kratos is not enacting any vengeance, and is in fact quite disconnected from the social structure of this Northern world. Instead, it is the Æsir who pick a fight with him and his son, reversing the direction of aggression between Kratos and other gods from its operation in the previous titles and fitting with mythological poetry's characterization of the aggressive Æsir (which is heightened in *God of War*).

Just as the interactions between *jötnar* and Æsir drive the action of the Old Norse mythological corpus, the same is true of *God of War*'s ludic portrayal of the mythos, although only a few of each group are shown directly, with most of the Giants (as they are most often referred to in the game) having been wiped out. However, as the player learns from different sources while progressing through the game, the Æsir have put themselves on a pedestal above all other beings, aggressively subjugating them and destroying those who refuse to kneel. In addition to the *jötnar*, elves and dwarves are shown inhabiting the nine realms of Norse mythology, similarly oppressed and manipulated by the scheming Odin. Mímir, rescued (albeit only his head) from his captivity and torture at the hands of Odin (whom he formerly served as a chief advisor) by Kratos and Atreus, also reveals a campaign of censorship, historical revisionism, and propaganda carried out by Odin and the Æsir. It soon becomes apparent, unsurprisingly to Kratos with his deep-seated mistrust and hatred of gods, that the Æsir, in particular Odin with Thor as his muscle, have sewn chaos, racism, misogyny, jingoism, and bloody conflict in their bid for domination of all nine realms of Norse cosmology. I will now turn to how the medieval literary sources of Norse mythology and their extrapolation into a coherent conceptualization of pre-Christian Norse civilization have been cleverly rearranged by Santa Monica Studio into a subversive retelling of the major Norse myths.

God of War and the Other: Genocide, Colonization, and the Twilight of the Gods

Proceeding from the point of view of Kratos as the player-character, who is a god and a son of Zeus, *God of War* thus establishes its scale of familiarity and foreignness in relation to

gods rather than mortal humans (as players themselves are).[27] However, this point of view plays well with Clunies Ross's aforementioned argument of a pro-Æsir point of view of *Snorra Edda* that includes humans against a *jötunn*/monstrous antagonistic element. Despite his deep hatred of gods stretching back to Ares' initial betrayal in the first *God of War*, Kratos is the same type of being as the Æsir in this northern realm he has escaped to since his defeat of the Olympians.[28] He keeps this fact secret from his son, Atreus, who thus believes he is mortal (despite repeated witnesses of Kratos' superhuman strength), with both son and father ignorant of the true nature of Faye, Atreus' mother. Regardless of their godliness, they both appear as any other humans would, yet are relegated away from the center of the Norse society of Midgard, Kratos through his foreign origin as a Greek and Atreus through his (at first unknown) half-Giant ancestry; for Midgard and the other eight realms of Norse myth are the dominion of the Æsir who do not tolerate threats to their sole power, and thus Kratos and Atreus find themselves mercilessly hunted by the Norse gods on account of their Otherness. Before Baldr tracked them down in the beginning of the game, Kratos and his family lived in a remote wood on the fringes of Midgard, situated spatially on the periphery in reflection of their peripheral social position.

Within the game's narrative, the tyranny of the Æsir has its roots in the Æsir-Vanir war, an event described in both the *Poetic* and *Prose Edda*. In *God of War*'s version, the *jötnar* choose to remain neutral, leading directly to their later persecution.[29] In the Old Norse sources, the Vanir are a mysterious tribe or group of beings who rivalled the Æsir in power. Just as in *God of War*, the Vanir of Old Norse literature were told to have once warred with the Æsir before

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[27] It is interesting to note that only a few living humans are encountered in *God of War* (2018), as it takes place close to the coming of Ragnarök and the majority of people are dead, with the land covered in the mysterious "Desecration" which is causing the souls of the strong-willed to return as Hellwalkers, *draugar*, and other undead or revenants.

[28] Considering Snorri's euhemerization of the Æsir into mortal kings from Troy, done to give northern culture a Classical origin on par with those of continental Europe, it is fascinating that *God of War* has a Greek god travel north to Scandinavia, further underlining the idea of subverting Snorri's version of the mythology. Whether this is on purpose or merely a delightful coincidence is open to debate. This idea is played up further with the next sentence, about Atreus, considering Snorri claimed the gods to be humans, while Kratos is *actually* a god.

[29] In the accounts of this conflict, which are given only briefly in *Völuspá* and in Snorri's writings, namely *Ynglinga saga*, *Gylfaginning*, and *Skáldskaparmál*, the *jötnar* are not mentioned at all and thus do not come into play in the war between the Æsir and Vanir clans of gods. Perhaps this led to the reasoning in *God of War* that they were choosing to remain neutral.

they settled the conflict with oaths and the exchange of hostages, eventually becoming a unified group dwelling in Ásgarðr. In Snorri's account, they are all gathered under Óðinn as the "Allfather" of the pre-Christian pantheon of Snorri's elite audience (*Gylfaginning*, p. 21). Generally, the Vanir are considered gods of fertility and fecundity, associated with weather, harvests, peace, but also war. In particular, the Eddic poem *Grímnismál* states that Freyja is allotted half of all those slain in battle, while Óðinn receives the other half (*Grímnismál,* stz. 14).[30] She is thus sometimes connected with Valkyries, the supernatural "choosers of the slain," as well as being known as the *vanadís*, "*dís* of the Vanir," the *dísir* being female spirits of battle and protection. Some scholars consider the possibility that the Vanir represent an older class of deities worshipped before dramatic upheavals in Northern European societies ca. 500 AD caused a change in religious paradigms (see Gunnell, 2007; Fabech, 2006); Gunnell has described this idea in light of his theorization of Óðinn subsuming/absorbing the powers and aspects of many different gods as he became the god of kingship and head of the "pantheon" (Gunnell, 2017, pp. 120–121). In *God of War*, the war between the two tribes of gods is concluded, on the advice of Mímir, with a marriage between Odin and Freyja, although peace does not last long. At the root of this conflict, and that which develops between the Æsir and the Giants, is Odin's obsession with knowledge, something well attested in the literary sources of Norse myth and which is played up further in *God of War*. As Mímir describes to Kratos and Atreus, "his [Odin's] reach is not unlimited. And where he cannot reach he is preoccupied with going." His desire for knowledge, which in the medieval literature is principally knowledge of the origin of the cosmos and especially of Ragnarök, is expounded in the game into desire for power and conquest. This also explains his obsession with Jötunheim, the homeland of the *jötnar*, which motivates events in the Æsir-Vanir war as well as his pursuit of Kratos and Atreus (to find the last *jötunn* in Midgard, Faye, to give him access to *jötunheim*, not knowing she is already dead and not knowing about Atreus, yet).

Though the peaceful *jötnar* in *God of War* remained neutral, Odin feared that they would tip the scales in favour of whichever side they might join, and on multiple occasions attempted to gain a foothold in Jötunheim to steal their secret knowledge and powers, though

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[30] All citations of Eddic poetry are from *Eddukvæði I*, JÓNAS KRISTJÁNSSON and Vésteinn Ólason (Eds.), Íslenzk Fornrit (Reykjavík: Hið Islenzka Fornritafélag, 2014).

he never succeeded. His initial failed attempt during the Æsir-Vanir war drove him mad with rage, and he and Thor, equipped with the recently forged Mjöllnir, visited their fury upon the Giants dwelling in Midgard. They killed all they could find outside of the protection of Jötunheim, carrying out a genocide upon the Giants all for Odin's frustration at being denied the knowledge and power he so desperately wanted.

The second attempt described in the storyworld of *God of War* is after the conclusion of the war when, as also occurs in the source myth *Þrymskviða*, the giant Thrym (*Þrymr*) steals Mjöllnir and offers to return it to the Æsir in exchange for Freyja as a bride (a common trope in Norse myth). In the game's version of the story, at this time she was still married to Odin, but he convinced her to use her magic to conceal Thor so he could follow her to Jötunheim; when they arrived and Thor recovered his hammer, he immediately started slaughtering every giant in sight. Freyja, wanting no part of the massacre, used her magic to eject them both from Jötunheim with no way back, again infuriating Odin. This could be what led to her to finally break off her marriage with Odin, having enough of his deception, selfishness, and cruelty, and out of spite he cursed her to remain forever in Midgard, unable to return to Vanaheim to correct their belief that she had betrayed them (this is unclear as to why, although it is possible both that her marriage to the Vanir's greatest enemy was a personal agreement rather than an official treaty, or simply a very unpopular decision, and because she taught Odin *seiðr*, a type of magic which was previously only known by Vanir gods[31]). She is thus an immigrant Other among the Æsir who then becomes a refugee trapped in Midgard and is permanently cut off from her home and people, as well as whatever allies she may have had among the Æsir. Even her name, deeds, and her own son are no longer her own. In the game narrative, Kratos and Atreus learn the identity of Freyja and that she is also mother to Baldr. In the mythology, it is Frigg rather than Freyja who is Baldr's mother, but *God of War* cleverly resolves this issue: Mímir explains to them that Frigg, meaning "beloved,"[32] was Odin's pet name for Freyja, "but as things turned sour, it became a way for him to manipulate the truth…Odin didn't want a Vanir goddess getting credit for anything in Asgard, so anything worthy she accomplished was attributed to Frigg." Thus, the game cleverly navigates a debate that has persisted in Old

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[31] In *Ynglinga saga* 4, Freyja is the one who originally taught *seiðr* to the Æsir, and this detail is also included in *God of War*.

[32] Technically true, via its root in the Proto-Germanic verb *frijōn* "to love," Sanskrit *priyā* "dear, beloved."

Norse scholarship for decades over the difference or identical nature of Frigg and Freyja and reveals how much research and thought the developers put into *God of War*.[33]

By reading into and transforming Norse mythology in this way, the developers further underline their characterization of Odin as a petty, cruel, and maniacal figure. While less foreign than Kratos in Midgard, Freyja is nevertheless thrust into a very vulnerable position, stripped of her valkyrie wings and thus her ability to fight, magically chained to Midgard and cut off from her homeland and native people. Margaret Sheble has discussed this depiction of Freyja, among other modern "Viking" women, as a colonized woman, with recourse to both the game fiction and the medieval sources. Sheble describes both this vulnerability as well as the forms of "micro-resistance" she carries out in order to further resist Odin's will. Freyja does this by aiding Kratos and Atreus in remaining untraceable by Æsir magic, guiding them on the different steps of their journey (sometimes quite directly), reviving Mímir's head with her knowledge of the "old magic" (*seiðr*), and, significantly, illustrating her own mistakes with her son Baldr as a lesson to Kratos about the pitfalls of parenting. Sheble argues that through these seemingly small actions, including the micro-resistance of her language which plays a major role in the author's discussion of other colonized women, "her influence is far more outreaching" beyond the immediacy of her own decisions (Sheble, 2019, §30) and affects the fates of Kratos, Atreus, her son Baldr, and likely the entire status quo of the nine worlds, as we shall see unfold in *God of War*'s forthcoming sequel.

Major works focused on Freyja and the goddesses of northern Europe and Fennoscandia were carried out by scholars of religion in the 1990s, namely Britt-Mari Näsström and Hilda Ellis Davidson. Both used comparative approaches to anthropology of religion to analyze female deities in search for Nordic interconnections with broader Proto-Indo-European religious structures, exemplified in both scholars' work on the "Great Goddess" figure who represented the overarching divinity that was worshipped in many forms under different names and aspects (hypostases), of which they both theorized Freyja and/or Frigg as the northern incarnation. Näsström, following Georges Dumézil's influential trifunctional hypothesis of Proto-Indo-European society, has described Freyja as the "trivalent

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[33] On this scholarly debate, see Ingunn Ásdísardóttir, 2006.

goddess" thusly: "When she appears as the great sorceress and the sacrificial priestess, she acts in the first, magico-religious function [sovereignty]. As the great valkyrie she is combined with the second [military, warrior class], and as love goddess and the owner of gold and riches she represents the third [productive class, farmers]" (Näsström, 1995, p. 97). These aspects of Freyja are all present in *God of War*'s depiction of the goddess, who was both leader of the Vanir people as well as a powerful user of *seiðr*, leader of the Valkyries and herself the most fearsome of them, and is shown controlling plants and living harmoniously with animal companions (notably her golden boar, one of Freyja's associated symbols in the medieval literature). Further, Näsström posits that the leader of the Valkyries may have changed from Freyja to Óðinn when the latter's transformation into a central warrior god associated with kingship "might have reduced Freyja's role as a war goddess" (Näsström, 1995, p. 149), which complements Gunnell's argument about Óðinn's absorption of other deities' possessions and aspects as he grew into the head of the Nordic "pantheon" (Gunnell, 2017, pp. 120–121), as well as *God of War*'s story in that Odin takes control of the Valkyries after he banishes Freyja. Davidson expanded on the trivalent model to discuss a wide array of potential hypostases of Freyja as the Great Goddess of the North, including a detailed discussion of her and Frigg's associations with the maternal, life-giving aspect which is exemplified in the story of Baldr (who of course plays a major role in *God of War* as Freyja's son) as well as both goddesses' connection to lamentation and weeping (Freyja's tears of gold for her missing husband Óðr, Frigg's tears for both Baldr and her husband Óðinn) (Davidson, 1998, pp. 169–170). As before, the presence of these features in *God of War*'s portrayal of Norse myth reveals the developers' eye for detail and nuanced approach which differentiates it from many other works of popular reception.

Although he has been mentioned a few times, it is also prudent to look closer at another important supporting character in *God of War*: Mímir. Mímir is not a native of this northern realm, as is underlined by his thick Scottish accent and describing his first association with gods being as a faerie king's errand boy.[34] Not unlike Kratos (though the British Isles are not nearly as foreign as Greece), he eventually moved North over time and came willingly to serve

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[34] This and other details imply Mímir in *God of War* is actually Puck, a sprite from British folklore most renowned as a servant of King Oberon in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

the mighty king of the Æsir, who was impressed with Mímir's claim to be the smartest man alive, but eventually had him imprisoned inside of a tree and tortured every day for the counsel which he previously gave freely. Whether it was purely Odin's paranoid belief that Mímir had betrayed him or that he had never trusted the Celt in the first place as a foreign Other remains unknown. Kratos and Atreus discover him so imprisoned, and he asks them to cut off his head and bring it to Freyja, who revives him with her *seiðr*, after which he joins the pair on the rest of their journey, answering lore questions and providing insights and stories about the landscape the player is passing through and the beings they encounter. It was noteworthy to me upon first hearing Mímir speak that he was both Celtic and enslaved, given the history of Scandinavians' enslavement of Celtic peoples during the Viking Age, as genetic tests on the population in Iceland have proven there were many more people than just those Norwegian noble families named in the foundational texts of *Landámabók* and *Íslendingabók*, who must have brought their households along with many Celtic slaves.[35] The decision to make Mímir into a foreign Gael is interesting, as *Heimskringla* chapter 4 gives that Mímir is one of the Æsir (though of course it is unwise to take Snorri at his word for details like this), but it certainly suits the game's vision of the Æsir as authoritarian and xenophobically racist, even towards one such as Mímir who possesses invaluable wisdom and cunning and came to serve Odin willingly. It is not unlike skilled foreigners who come to seek careers in Western nations, often greeted by a certain coldness and isolation, and sometimes much worse forms of antagonism as we sadly know.

Kratos himself offers another strand of modern social discourse that finds its way into Midgard, besides being of foreign Greek origin in the context of Othering and the supremacism of the Æsir gods. This discourse is that of gender, which we glimpse in characters like Freyja but is more pronounced in the protagonist and his struggles with parenthood and with his vitriolic behavior in the past games. This aspect is the topic of an article by Steven Conway, which views the latest *God of War* as a departure from the norm beyond its change of

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[35] About such genomic research, see Sigríður Sunna Ebenesersdóttir et al., 2018. Gaelic/Celtic inhabitants of Iceland also appear in the medieval literature, in remembrance of the reality, such as the Irish slave-concubine Melkorka in *Laxdæla saga*, a character that Sheble also discusses. Beyond this, there were also strong connections between Norse and Celtic peoples in Scotland, Ireland, and the Northern Isles, especially Viking Dublin which was an important Norse town from the 9th to the 11th centuries.

scenery from Greek to Norse mythology, but also as turning over a new leaf for Kratos, whose toxic masculinity and flat, rage-driven motivation had defined the series up to this point.[36] Kratos taking the risk to become a father again reflects the life of Cory Barlog, the creative director of several games in the series, who himself had become a father and experienced firsthand the radical changes it brought and believed it could do the same for Kratos. Conway demonstrates how *God of War* not only illustrates the terrible repercussions of toxic masculinity but also offers remedies to it (Conway, 2019, pp. 8–10). This is exemplified in the many scenes of Kratos struggling to connect and show affection to Atreus, which, after much friction between the two, finally results in a touching moment at the denouement of the story when he puts his arm around his son as the two spread Faye's ashes from the peak of Jötunheim. Conway draws on theories and perspectives from multiple streams of academic thought in his erudite analysis, demonstrating how the enactment of hypermasculinity is built into the gameplay systems themselves, even while the game's narrative challenges these ideas (Conway, 2019, p. 15). Most striking is the etymological example of the name Kratos, meaning literally "power" and personified as strength in Hesiod's *Theogony*, illustrating the excessiveness of Kratos' hypermasculinity, when his greatest strength, his rage (and the male power fantasy it allows), also becomes his greatest weakness, akrasia, of the same root as his namesake and meaning "loss of control" (Conway, 2019, p. 2).

Throughout the game, Kratos' struggles with fatherhood, and the dangerous path Atreus begins to tread that warningly resembles the rage-filled tendencies of his father's earlier life, the father-son duo are mirrored by Freyja's relationship to her son by Odin, Baldr. Their relationship is extremely toxic, marred by Freyja's overbearing protection at his birth when, instead of Frigg as in the medieval sources, Freyja foresaw Baldr's untimely death and beseeched all things in the world to swear never to harm him (*Gylfaginning* 49). In a clever twist by Santa Monica Studios, his invulnerability also comes with the side effect of being completely numb to all sensations, both pleasant and painful, which causes him to deeply

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[36] Toxic masculinity is a complex term predicated on several lines of thinking in social and cultural theoretical scholarship, but which is often bandied about in popular discourses as well. While I cannot delve deeply into this term, Conway offers a brief determination that toxic masculinity "arises from an extreme adherence to, and enforcement of, the hegemonic paradigm [of masculinity]" (Conway, 2019, p. 6); the excessive acting out of masculinity turns destructive and harmful, hence "toxic."

resent his mother for her meddling, even trying to murder her on multiple occasions. Freyja sees herself in Kratos and warns him to learn from her mistakes in parenthood. This ultimately results in Kratos finally connecting with his son in the scene mentioned above, symbolizing a "rehabilitated masculinity," when Kratos "has begun to understand his identity as a self-in-relation enabling intersubjectivity, rather than a hyper-masculine Self-alone" (Conway, 2019, p. 10). Conway's concluding thoughts praise the way the game's narrative and gameplay elements work together to reinforce this message of problematizing hegemonic masculinity, questioning what makes it turn toxic, and offering more positive forms of masculine performativity and privileging a self-in-relation, especially amidst a gaming culture and production industry which is quite rife with toxic behavior.[37]

Another difference between current and past iterations of *God of War* bears mentioning. In the Greek-centered *God of War* games, Kratos' masculinity is particularly (over)emphasized in several sex scenes with "impossibly sinuous women, where combat audio files (such as Kratos' grunts) are recycled to now convey violent intercourse" (Conway, 2019, p. 7). The women in these scenes, present as "mini-games" in several titles in the series, are "regularly devalued as objects for sex" and are presented as objects of "misogynist exploitation" to gain large sums of the game's currency, "orbs," which the player uses to empower Kratos' abilities and weapons (Conway, 2019, p. 7; Schmalfuß, 2010, p. 223). The crudeness of these scenes is matched by the arbitrary way they are played, having only the singular solution of following the game's button-prompts until the women are "satisfied," reflecting the "teleological structure of a chauvinistic 'masculine' sexuality" performed by the exaggeratedly-masculine, violent, and animalistic Kratos of the older games (Schmalfuß, 2010, p. 222). In *God of War* (2018), however, the presence of such sex scenes is notably absent, as are the misogynistic and pornographic portrayal of female characters, to the chagrin of some fans (although a minority to be sure).[38] This type of reaction could have been compounded by the new setting of *God of*

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[37] It is nevertheless pertinent to mention that Conway also points out here that the game does not succeed completely, as its logic still privileges masculinity over femininity and reinforces gender binaries (Conway, 2019, p. 15). It is a step in the right direction, though.

[38] There was some fan backlash at the new direction of the series and its evolved portrayal of Kratos as older and wrestling with his demons rather than giving into them (as in the crude and violent depiction of sex in prior games), but this was more a situation of the "loud minority" rather than a truly widespread outcry of *God of War* fans. The difficulty I encountered with finding mentions of displeasure at the removal of sex and nudity from the newest game speaks for itself in this regard, and when I did

War in a Norse and Viking themed world, cultural icons long associated with ideas not only of racial purity and superiority, but also of a form of dangerous, uninhibited, and violent masculinity (the phrase "rape and pillage" goes hand-in-hand with "Viking"). Both Kaufman (2016) and Sigurdson (2014) have addressed the use of rape and violent misogyny as historicizing devices in medievalist works, and how such works "often cross the fine line between critiquing a bygone era's misogyny and celebrating it for the pleasure of its readers, players, and viewers" (Kaufman, 2016, p. 58). The idea that "Viking sexuality is consistently presented as powerful, dominant, and fundamentally predicated on violence, whether this is construed as attractively dominant, or destructive and terrifying" (Sigurdson, 2014, p. 256) aligns closely with the behavior of Kratos in the Greek-centered games, a character originally designed to "make the player feel he was being able to unleash his dark side" (Jaffe, 2005).[39] Perhaps, then, these (few) disgruntled fans felt a disconnect with their beloved, brutal anti-hero, Kratos, being repositioned in a world popularly associated with Vikings and all that entails, but no longer having all the same elements of toxic masculinity and misogyny (and rather it critiques and challenges these elements of the past games).

While Freyja, Mímir, and Kratos serve as exemplars of the discourses of gender, Othering/foreignness, and to an extent colonialism, I would like to return to the *jötnar* once more as they portray these latter two concepts more starkly, especially in consideration of their near-complete genocide by the time of the game's action. The *jötnar*'s mischaracterization in both scholarship and popular understanding is underscored in the translation of their name as "giant," a holdover from the infancy of Old Norse studies during which Classicists, turning their attention to the medieval North, likened the *jötnar* to the titans of Greek mythology. This

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succeed (namely by searching for keywords such as "sex" in r/GodofWar, the Reddit.com forum devoted to the series), it was unequivocally a minority opinion that was met with criticism and argumentation about the different tone of the new game and Kratos' characterization no longer having room for tasteless, misogynistic sex scenes. Barlog himself has responded on Twitter to such remarks with sarcastic humor aimed at the ridiculousness of wanting a sex scene in a story about Kratos' solemnly carrying his wife's ashes and coming to grips with his past in an effort to connect with and raise his son to be a better person than himself (see the article with this tweet at https://www.gamingbible.co.uk/news/playstation-god-of-war-director-responds-to-lack-of-sex-scenes-in-2018-game-20200507). Otherwise, the new portrayal of Kratos and the change of pace of the latest *God of War* has been met overwhelmingly with acclaim, both from critics and fans.

[39] Quote from David Jaffe, creative director of the first *God of War*, in bonus commentary of the game entitled "Heroic Possibilities," available for instance on YouTube: https://youtu.be/g3MIcXOkBWI.

was deduced not only from the discernible similarities between the two mythological types of beings (mostly limited to their shared status as enemies of the gods and their role as forebears of the same gods) but also from ancient and medieval writers who made such connections long before these scholars. The *interpretatio romana* of deities encountered in the wide reaches of the Roman empire likened the gods of foreign cultures with their own, evident in works such as Tacitus' *Germania*, which recounted the Roman names of gods being worshipped by various Germanic tribes.[40] Additionally, the distinctions between certain types of beings in Old Norse mythology broke down over time, and the *jötnar* were blended with ideas and images of things such as *risar* and *tröll* in the later folklore, a process which Snorri's writing clearly contributed to or even began (Ingunn Ásdísardóttir, 2018, pp. 216–237; cf. Grant, 2019). Thus, the "giants" of Old Norse mythology were implanted in both the popular and scholarly imagination as literal giants, like those in other mythologies and later folklore, monstrous beings inimical to gods and men that dwelled somewhere far out in the wilderness. Through this association with the wilderness, they became metaphorically interpreted as the antithesis of society, order, civilization, and peace. Their origin as the first sentient beings, Ymir being the progenitor of all the mythological races, was placed in a similar light as their association with chaos, and interpreted as giants being personified forces of primordial, unshapen matter, and thus the primordial chaos before order was brought by the shaping endeavours of the gods. Yet this does not exactly hold water on consideration of the myths on their own terms, separated from these long-held preconceptions.

For instance, according to Snorri, it is a *jötunn* (who is also called a *bergrisi*, a "mountain *risi*/giant"; we can see the blurring of distinctions already at this point), rather than any god, who is commissioned to build the fortifications of *Ásgarðr* for the Æsir (*Gylfaginning* 42); after they threaten Loki into helping them weasel out of the deal, Þórr is summoned to murder the craftsman. *Völuspá*'s first mention of women are three *þursa meyjar* who come *ór jötunheimum* (*Völuspá*, stz. 8), and before this the Æsir are merely sitting around in a field playing chequers and smithing golden objects, interpretable as a group made up only of men at this point. Rather than being dull, dim-witted, and brutish as they are characterized through the

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[40] For instance, in describing the general nature and character of the peoples he refers to as *germani*, Tacitus states that they worship Mercury as the highest deity, and also give sacrifices to Hercules and Mars (Tacitus, *Germania* 9).

translation of "giant" as well as their later folkloric conflation with trolls and ogres, *jötnar* are the oldest of the mythological races and thus have cosmogonic knowledge. They live in halls and have precious objects and resources (and beautiful women) that the gods desire. Additionally, *jötnar* also are told to have foreknowledge of Ragnarök, coveted by Óðinn, who seeks them out to try and win their knowledge in riddle contests such as that depicted in *Vafþrúðnismál*. Their knack for prophecy and deep mythological lore about the beginning of the cosmos points to the *jötnar* as being anything but simple-minded, yet are perhaps able to be called too trusting, as it is often them who stick to their word on agreements and treaties with the gods while the Æsir are the ones beguiling them, breaking oaths and truces. Ingunn's work touched on these and many more episodes of the mythology, and she remarks that "rather than being essentially related to the end of the world, the *jötnar* in the Eddic poems are shown as being part of its foundation, and a key to its development" (Ingunn Ásdísardóttir, 2018, p. 236).

God of War makes use of all these features in its diegetic reformulation of the *jötnar*, granting them both foreknowledge and cosmogonic lore, as well as having them being tricked by the Æsir more than once in Odin's bid to steal their knowledge and invade Jötunheim. Through both this faithfulness to the medieval sources' variable portrayals of *jötnar*, as well as by playing up Snorri's account of their interactions with the Æsir, *God of War* constructs a subversive retelling of Norse mythology that paints the *jötnar* as a wise, peaceable, and ingenious race of beings on even footing with both the Æsir and Vanir, only relegated to their present state of ruination by Odin's tyrannical machinations and Thor's psychotic bloodlust. Again, Mímir offers much insight into the world and beings of the nine realms, and shares the story of Ymir with Atreus and Kratos, which is indicative of how the sources, largely unaltered, are read through and expounded into the reimagining of *God of War*:

> Every God, man, and beast came first from Ymir's flesh. Though it was the Æsir who thought themselves so superior that they should hold dominion over the rest of creation. It was Odin who took arms against his creator and spilled Ymir's life-blood with his spear. A necessary evil, he would say, to bring Order to the realms. From Ymir's torn flesh, Odin would fashion the realm of Midgard for his own. Called himself "Allfather"– as if he was the creator, and not the creator's destroyer. A small... covetous... tyrant!

Atreus picks up on Mímir's evident frustration in the telling of the tale, a frequent feature of his stories about the Æsir gods, which usually concern their murdering, conniving, and conquering. This reading of the *jötnar* sees through the older scholarly rendering of their nature as well as Snorri's depiction, and touches more upon the aspects of the *jötnar* that Ingunn reveals in her close analysis of the whole body of material involving them as being integrally bound up in the creation of life, the cosmos, and their development. Inversely, it is the Æsir who bring about the chaos, destruction, and death, though this is more pronounced in *God of War* than in the sources, as befits the series.

The subversive telling of Norse mythology offered is not a simple one, however. *God of War* also maintains some key aspects from Snorri, such as the *jötnar* still living in mountains and caves. The first example of this is the huge mountain that Kratos and Atreus travel to the top of to disperse Faye's ashes, and Atreus reads runic carvings within that tell how it was inhabited by the Giants long ago; a second is Jötunheim itself, which is only shown briefly at the end of the game, as it is revealed that "the highest peak in the realms" meant the towering peak of Jötunheim rather than the previous mountain in Midgard. This short sequence has the protagonists cross a bridge into a cave in the side of the peak, with many ornately carved statues of *jötnar* and runic inscriptions alongside carved reliefs telling the story of the *jötnar*'s retreat from Midgard and a prophecy of Kratos and Atreus' entire journey (displaying their prophetic foresight again).

Leaving this cave and heading out onto a promontory cliff, Atreus and Kratos overlook an arid, mountainous terrain littered with the gargantuan bodies of fallen *jötnar*, whose color and texture match the rocky landscape of their homeland, as they scatter Faye's ashes to be with her people. There are two important aspects to highlight in this final part of the narrative: Faye as a Giant and the *jötnar* corpses being huge in an expected yet unexpected way. The latter point, firstly, is interesting considering the game's conscious acknowledgment that the Giants were not all inherently giant (though some were). In a wonderful exchange of dialogue inside the large mountain of Midgard, after Atreus discovers that the *jötnar* used to live there, Kratos determines the passages seem too small for giants. Atreus laughs at Kratos' seemingly ignorant statement, and states that "Giants are just a race, like Elves and Huldrafolk, it doesn't mean they're big." Kratos counters this by citing the existence of Miðgarðsormr, whom they

met earlier and who is a member of the Giant race, to which Atreus concedes the exception of size. However, the vista of the many enormous, fallen *jötnar* contradicts this earlier description by Atreus. Given the attention to detail evident in the rest of the game's treatment of the myths, a slipup does not seem likely, yet neither does it lend itself to any obvious interpretation presently, barring content from the future sequel. Perhaps it is a testament to the enduring strength of the conflation of *jötnar* with giants after so many years, a product of reception history that has stuck fast regardless of scholars quibbling over accuracy.

It is revealed at the end of the narrative that Faye was a *jötunn*, unbeknownst to both Kratos and Atreus, who rather believed her to be mortal. She was the former owner of Kratos' Leviathan Axe, which she used to protect the weak and defenceless in her travels throughout the nine realms after leaving Jötunheim to experience the wider world. Throughout the player's guiding of Kratos and Atreus on the game's narrative journey, any climbable or traversable obstacles are marked by golden paint depicting abstract symbols; we are clued into the significance of this in the very opening cutscene of the game, though players may not realize it until later when this is addressed directly. Faye marked the trees she wished to be used in her funeral pyre with the same golden paint, there as handprints. The trees she marked previously formed a magical boundary which had kept the woods around their home safe, and in having them chopped down, the barrier was broken, forcing Kratos to bring Atreus along on the journey to spread her ashes (he was gravely ill early in his life, leading Kratos to doubt his readiness for an arduous journey). These aspects foreground Faye's true identity as a *jötunn* and an Other kind of being, both from what Kratos and Atreus assumed of her nature and from the realm she inhabited outside of her native Jötunheim (especially considering the Æsir's stance on *jötnar*). She is thus not a colonized woman in the same way Freyja is, especially so considering her reputation as a powerful warrior who defended the weak and willingly left her home, though she is nonetheless foreign and Other in the Æsir power structure. Father and son realize that Faye had taken their entire journey ahead of them, and knew they would follow behind her and left the golden markings to aid them.

As Kratos and Atreus ponder these revelations, they also realize that Atreus is thus half-god and half-*jötunn*, and Kratos tells how Faye originally wanted to name Atreus Loki[41]; after Atreus unwittingly weakens Baldr with mistletoe and the duo at last killing him, it is clear from then on what direction *God of War* plans to take the story in its sequel (confirmed by the recent gameplay trailer of *God of War: Ragnarök*). In the *Prose Edda,* Baldr's death at the unwitting hands of his blind brother Höðr, armed with mistletoe (the only thing that Frigg had not made swear never to harm her son) and directed by Loki, is the event which sparks Ragnarök, though first comes the *fimbulvetr*, a "great winter" spanning three seasons without pause (*Gylfaginning* 49 & 51). In *God of War*'s climactic battle, as Baldr falls dead after Kratos snaps his neck to prevent him from killing his mother Freyja, his final word is, simply, "snow," which begins to fall at that moment, remarking on the sudden return of his senses after the mistletoe broke Freyja's spell of invulnerability upon him. It is interesting to note, whether intentioned or not, how the cause of Ragnarök in *God of War* is two foreign Others: Kratos, a Greek god, and Atreus, the son of this Greek and a *jötunn* woman. This could be read several ways, of course, but I see it as symbolic of the failure of the Æsir's pseudo-ethnostatist aspirations in Midgard as well as the beginning of the end of the reign of the gods there, just as Kratos brought about in Greece.

It is also a possibility in the next game that Odin's actions, while barbaric and excessive, could be contextualized as part of his attempt to prevent his son Baldr's death and the destruction of his world at Ragnarök, both of which are the direct aims of his constant knowledge-seeking in the medieval sources. Regardless, he seems to suffer the paradox of prophecy: in seeking to prevent a prophesied event, one takes the very steps which bring it about, also falling in line with the Old Norse and broader Germanic literary trope of the

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[41] Atreus being Loki is an interesting and expansive topic that cannot be covered here, but which effectively made the writers of *God of War* have to reshape many Norse myths into stories without Loki there to spur the gods and *jötnar* to action with his mischief, which also causes many temporal problems (for instance, Miðgarðsormr is a major character in *God of War* but has apparently traveled back in time from Ragnarök as a result of the sheer power output that resulted in his mighty clash with Thor). A recent YouTube video, while non-academic, does discuss this topic in depth: STERRITT, Javed, "Untangling God of War", Good Blood (channel name), YouTube, March 7th, 2021, video, 36:29, https://youtu.be/yegRHiaao7U. This also reveals Faye's full name, Laufey, the mother of Loki in the medieval sources, about whom nothing is known beyond her name. Loki is called Laufey's son in *Gylfaginning* 33, *Lokasenna* 52, and *Þrymskviða* 18 & 20.

unavoidability of fate, entangled with notions of the heroic and mythical.[42] And even if this were the case, that Odin goes to such extremes for the sake of his son and all he held dear, the nobility of such an end is certainly sullied by the means of supremacism, authoritarianism, oath-breaking (a very antisocial act in many ancient and medieval societies), and genocide.

Further, if we take the evidence from literature such as *Völuspá* about female entities first arriving from other places mentioned above, both from *Jötunheim* and the *Urðarbrunni* from whence come the three *nornir*, in tandem with the game's presentation of the fates of female entities and the other evidence previously covered, Odin's desired empire of Æsir-supremacism and authoritarian might also has a distinctly misogynistic element to it. In addition to Freyja's position of vulnerability discussed earlier (keeping in mind how the deeds she did accomplish earlier were attributed to her Æsir duplicate "Frigg" by Odin), nine valkyries are present in *God of War* as optional, hidden bosses.[43] Like in the literature, they are *valkyrjur*, "choosers of the slain" who are tasked with bringing the souls of the dead from the battlefield to *Valhöll* (and *Fólkvangr*); Freyja was formerly the queen of the valkyries, a title stripped along with her wings by Odin's punishment, and then Odin forced the valkyries to remain in physical form permanently, which by the game's logic led to their corruption as they are essentially beings of spirit. Freyja's successor as queen, Sigrún, overpowered and imprisoned her other eight sisters to prevent them from wreaking havoc, which then caused the road to Hel to become choked with the numerous and unguided souls of the dead, who began spilling back into Midgard as revenants the player must fight.

Conclusion

God of War does a good job in its reception and transformation of Old Norse culture, and, if I may, is somewhat unique in that regard. To elaborate, in a sea of medievalism and

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[42] On fate in Germanic pre-Christian thought, see Winterbourne, 2004. On fate in Old Norse mythology, see chapter 7 of Clunies Ross, 1994 and Bek-Pedersen, 2011. On fate in the Icelandic sagas, see Gropper, 2017.

[43] The term "boss" refers to the video game convention of special, stronger enemies for the player to fight against, which take longer and offer a greater challenge to overcome and act as thresholds for further advancement.

receptions of various pasts made available through the culture industry and the internet, many of which it seems are lackluster at best, and at worst, sinister (particularly when it comes to Old Norse medievalism), it becomes important to highlight those products of reception that make clever, complicated use of their sources, do some justice, or perform some other noteworthy transformation that breathes new life into old cultural material, rekindling its magic in new forms; they need not be perfect, such an idea does not even exist. The writers at Santa Monica Studio reached a level of nuanced understanding of Old Norse myth generally not seen elsewhere in recent popular receptions of this material, at least within my own experience, from which basis they created a clever and subversive retelling paired with a vivid and epic gameworld worthy of the clash of mythic beings.

Concerning the embedding of new sentiments and concerns into this old mythology, I have referred to other scholars who described postcolonial attitudes and trends from feminist thought and made my own observations on topics of foreignness and racism exemplified in the villainy of the Æsir. I personally think it is quite poetic that a jump to Old Norse mythology for the *God of War* series is consciously dealing with themes of (post)colonialism, racism and intolerance, feminism (including feminist critiques of toxic masculinity and promotion of new understandings of healthy masculinity), parenthood, etc., considering Old Norse culture is tenaciously plagued by white nationalist and supremacist ideological usurpation. Toxic masculinity (or at least problematic forms of hegemonic masculine behavior), racism, exclusionary or elitist attitudes, and other forms of intolerance are in fact shared problems between the phenomena of Nordic medievalism/romanticism and video games, both the culture of players and the industry; as Conway mentioned, the addressing of these issues and an attempt to move beyond them within a AAA game—the latest of a very popular and beloved series at that—is promising, and offers a glimpse at the slow processes of social change at work within artifacts of popular culture that reach audiences of millions worldwide.

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