

# THE “NEW” NORTH

## *Perceptions, Projections and Memories of Medieval Scandinavia in Video Games as Popular Media*

Luca Arruns Panaro



Master's Thesis in Viking and Medieval Norse Studies  
MAS4091 (30 Credits)

Department of Linguistics and Scandinavian Studies

UNIVERSITY OF OSLO

Faculty of Icelandic and Comparative Cultural Studies

HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Spring 2019



# THE “NEW” NORTH

## *Perceptions, Projections and Memories of Medieval Scandinavia in Video Games as Popular Media*

Luca Arruns Panaro



Master's Thesis in Viking and Medieval Norse Studies

Supervisor: Karl Gunnar Johansson

Department of Linguistics and Scandinavian Studies

UNIVERSITY OF OSLO

Faculty of Icelandic and Comparative Cultural Studies

HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Spring 2019

© Luca Arruns Panaro

2019

The “New” North: Perceptions, Projections, and Memories of Medieval Scandinavia in Video Games as Popular Culture

Luca Arruns Panaro

<http://www.duo.uio.no/>

Printer: Reprosentralen, Universitetet i Oslo

# THESIS SUMMARY

This thesis explores the modern reception of Old Norse literary culture in video games, a sphere of global popular culture which is heretofore unexplored in the field of Old Norse studies. This topic is relevant in light of the recent mass (re)popularization of Viking history and themes in the popular entertainment industry, exemplified not only by games but also by film and television. By focusing on the genre of medieval fantasy broadly, and how this genre is deployed in the medium of electronic role-playing games (RPGs), this recent rise in popularity is charted in the gaming world by reviewing four important titles made in the past fifteen years.

This work represents the first stage of a larger project aimed at exploring the presence and transformation of Old Norse culture in broader popular culture, across media, and what these trends represent from social, political, and perhaps ecological viewpoints. As such, the thesis accomplishes two things: 1) It creates a new methodological and theoretical framework for the analysis of Old Norse elements in popular entertainment media (here, specifically video games) by drawing upon a range of other established academic fields, ranging from French structuralism to narratology, psychology of immersion, memory and reception studies, and more. 2) It demonstrates the application of this framework to the four video games mentioned previously, illustrating in relief the increasing popularity of Viking subjects in popular culture in the sphere of electronic games, and also making some observations about other entertainment media which demonstrate a preoccupation with the medieval North.

Some conclusions are drawn that center on the social and cultural implications of the transferal of this medieval Scandinavian material into the spotlight, in particular about how memories of the medieval North and northern peoples play a significant role in reception concerns and in the production of new cultural products. New instantiations that focus on such subjects reflect, draw upon, transform, and redeploy these memories, and in turn create new memories which will necessarily affect successive generations of products going forward. This process creates a dynamic chain of what I term *retextualization*, a process which, in the past, occurred in texts and performances (as with the Icelandic sagas and poems), and today includes across a range of new media, such as with video games.

# FOREWORD

Gratitude to my supervisor, Karl Gunnar Johansson, whose assistance and steady guidance helped to keep this thesis on track and to make it a reality since I first brought my jumbled thoughts to his office last fall.

Thanks also to Haraldur Bernharðsson, Torfi Tulinius, and all the other professors at Háskóli Íslands and Universitetet i Oslo, who founded this MA program and tirelessly support young scholars in the field like myself.

Special thanks to my sister-in-arms, Olivia Elliot Smith, whose moral and academic support was invaluable throughout this program.

Eternal gratitude to Tina, Adrian, and Lars Panaro, who encouraged me to apply to this program and supported me along the way.

*GTGA*

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>The Focus</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>Importance and Relevance</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>CHAPTER I</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR NEW MEDIA</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>The Heterotopia</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>Polysystem Theory</b> .....	<b>12</b>
<b>Historical Precedents: Romanticism, Nationalism, Systemic Movements</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>The Storyworld: Formulating the “North” as Mental Landscape</b> .....	<b>18</b>
<b>Aesthetic Illusion: The Immersive Power of Storyworlds in Action</b> .....	<b>20</b>
<b>Relics, Irruption, and Embedding: Objects which evoke the “North” in Fiction and Reality</b> .....	<b>23</b>
<b>Memory and Reception: an Overview of their Basic Principles and Application to a Theory of the Constructed “North”</b> .....	<b>26</b>
<b>CHAPTER II</b> .....	<b>31</b>
<b>PLAYING THE “NORTH”: GAMES IN THE INSPIRATION/CONSTRUCTION CONTINUUM</b> .....	<b>31</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>31</b>
<b><i>Fable</i>: A Prototypical English Take on the Medieval Fantasy RPG</b> .....	<b>32</b>
<b><i>Dark Souls</i>: An Eastern View of European Medieval Fantasy</b> .....	<b>37</b>
<b><i>Skyrim</i>: The “Total Nordic” Experience</b> .....	<b>42</b>
<b><i>Jotun</i>: “Ek er Þóra, Jötna bani!”</b> .....	<b>47</b>
<b>CONCLUSION</b> .....	<b>50</b>
<b>ANALYSIS AND RESULTS</b> .....	<b>50</b>
<b>Bibliography</b> .....	<b>56</b>





# INTRODUCTION

## The Focus

This thesis will be an analysis of the ways in which the medieval Scandinavian and broader Germanic literary traditions are received, transformed, and repurposed in modern popular culture. In particular, I will focus on the role of video games in this reception, a genre of digital entertainment that has become a booming international market over the past thirty years. This will necessitate the understanding of games as cultural artifacts with the potential to carry, convey, and generate meanings. Previous scholarly approaches to video games have generally been from formalistic and structuralist bases that deal with the cognitive and computational mechanisms involved in game design and execution.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, I will view them in terms of their narrative contents and their nature as a powerful storytelling medium with the ability to digitally realize vivid portrayals of fantastic worlds and heroic beings.

My initial focus is on theory and methodology in order to construct a framework for reviewing and understanding the presence and use of medieval Scandinavian culture in modern popular culture, comprising the first chapter. The analysis proper takes place in the second chapter, and is a case study that will be used to test the application of the framework on four video games. Therefore, the discussion of theory is not merely a preamble to the study, but is a central focus in and of itself.

For younger generations, video games have become a medium equivalent in prevalence to film and television with regards to popularity and power of their storytelling capacity, due in no small part to the ability mentioned above as well as their immersive nature. In future explorations, it would also be fruitful to consider how these media influence one another; for instance, could it be posited that the recent rise in television and film of programs with heavy Scandinavian cultural flavor (*Vikings*, *Game of Thrones*, Marvel's *Thor* movie adaptations) is due in part to the preceding rise in the world of video games (particularly the hugely-popular *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*)? While this is not the express purpose of the present study, the overall rise in popularity of "Viking" stories and aesthetics over the past decade or so is indeed in question here.

---

<sup>1</sup> For reference to these kinds of studies, see the extensive journal *Game Studies: the international journal of computer game research*. While full of diverse approaches to games which vary issue by issue, a constant presence are these formalistic studies that discuss the computer hardware and coding aspects of game design, and their implications. For instance, cf. Johan Blomberg, "The Semiotics of the Game Controller," *Game Studies* 18, no. 2 (2018). As the name implies, this article is devoted purely to the indispensable role fulfilled by the controller hardware handled by the player and its semiotic significance for game interactivity.

Jón Karl Helgason and Laurent Di Filippo have both recently noted the discrepancy in the field of Old Norse reception studies that an important component, memory, has been largely left out of the equation. Jón Karl considers the impact of mass culture and globalization and how popular culture affects human imagination and thus memory, particularly in light of concepts like collective and cultural memory (although he urges us to problematize narratives of homogeneity in memory construction, as well as notions of collectivity broadly).<sup>2</sup> Di Filippo reminds us that the temporal dimensions of the transmission process contribute to the constructions of memory; that “reception” is more than just the production context or the receiving audience, regardless of artifacts’ media, and that “the meaning of memory in popular culture products must therefore be understood as a conversation between the activities of the producers and the various appropriations of the consumers. In other words, there is a subjective part in the construction of memory that must be taken into account.”<sup>3</sup> He also urges us to consider the process of forgetting as the companion phenomenon to remembering, and that what is forgotten is just as important as what is recalled in the shaping of new cultural products and traditions.

In the spaces between these two or three fields, narratology, memory studies and reception studies (reception studies, to me, is very closely connected to memory studies, and I consider the former to be a particularized subfield of the latter), the present study seeks to build the platform for future research into the Nordic<sup>4</sup> contents of contemporary popular culture and the nature of its presence and use in such states. Where narratologists are quite cautious with how to approach the unique quality of video games and draw on the formalist approaches from game theory that largely look at games as a medium, this thesis will view them as products of mass culture that are globally disseminated and carry with them new and unique formulations of older cultural material to a generation that is now reaching (or has reached) adulthood (and to subsequent generations as well, who are even more engrossed in the culture of technology). And where historians of reception sometimes leave memory by the wayside,<sup>5</sup> this study will seek to understand the memory carrying-transforming power of

---

<sup>2</sup> Jón Karl Helgason, “Popular Culture,” in *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, eds. Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann, & Stephen Mitchell (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018): 371-373.

<sup>3</sup> Laurent Di Filippo, “Contemporary Popular Culture,” in *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies*, 381-382.

<sup>4</sup> *Nordic* is a term I use with all intents and purposes, as the idea of the North in popular culture and collective memory is just as constructed as is the concept of a kind of homogeneity of the Nordic countries and cultures, and these ideas likely influence one another in a systemic way.

<sup>5</sup> Di Filippo, “Contemporary Popular Culture,” 381-382. He describes how “most of the academic work [in the field of Old Norse studies] addressing popular culture does not integrate the question of memory and tradition and mostly deals with literary influences, receptions, and adaptations.”

popular culture. Here I consider video games, a largely untapped and significant resource of scholarly inquisition, but the horizons of the methodology and mindset established could be expanded to include other media of contemporary popular culture, such as books, television, film, music, and whatever other forms of entertainment happen to be invented and disseminated along the way.

By necessity, this thesis will address the historical arc of the reception of Old Norse and Germanic literature and culture, albeit as briefly as possible for this has been detailed many times by other scholars.<sup>6</sup> Focus will be kept on modernity, with the rise of national romanticism and the cultural artifacts of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Particular adaptations by scholars-turned-authors led to the diffusion of literary and cultural elements and the spirit of the medieval North Atlantic world to the emerging global mass culture market, due to their success and popularity. I speak of course of individuals such as William Morris, Richard Wagner, and especially J.R.R. Tolkien in the next generation, whose work is credited as the very foundation of modern high medieval fantasy. It is hard to overstate Tolkien's contribution to the genre, as *The Hobbit* and its sequel, the epic *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, gained international acclaim, well beyond the boundaries of the western world. It is well known by both scholars of Tolkien's works and of the cultures of the medieval North Atlantic that he drew upon and transformed the medieval literary material of Anglo-Saxon England, Ireland, Finland, and Scandinavia (which he studied professionally and taught at Oxford for many years), synthesizing them into an imaginative world of great breadth and depth that captivates people up to the present day. Thus, even for those who are unfamiliar with the medieval literary roots of Tolkien's fantasy, his works gave audiences a crash course in all the greatest tales and themes of the medieval Northern world, albeit in an altered and synthesized state; the seeds were planted for contemporary medievalism in all its diverse forms and throughout various media formats.

Tolkien's influence transcended literature and grew to impact nearly all forms of media that deal with medieval fantasy themes and topics. With the adaptation of his style of fantasy setting into the tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* in 1974, the game world of high fantasy medievalism was born. While there is not enough space in the present study to give Tolkien's influence the attention it deserves, it is necessary to elucidate this chain of what I term *retextualization*, from the medieval past into Tolkien's fiction, and from

---

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Stefanie Von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival: Transformations of Germanic Neopaganism* (Leiden: Brill, 2016). This text will be referenced and discussed more in-depth later in the thesis.

its preeminent position and global success into an integral (indeed foundational) element of the contemporary genre(s) of medieval fantasy, creating an indirect (or mediated) yet strong cultural connection between the past and present. As will be shown, the capacity of stories to affect our perceptions of reality in many meaningful ways is tied to their significant role in the production, transformation, and retention (and also forgetting, as above) of memories.

In order to demonstrate the themes and phenomena that are the subject of this analysis, I have selected some of the most prominent and popular games of the last fifteen years, those works which could be argued to have had the most commercial success and thus the widest cultural dispersion. In chronological order, the titles are: *Fable*, a series developed by Lionhead Studios, of England, which released the first game in 2004; *Dark Souls*, developed by the Japanese company FromSoftware, released in September 2011; the fifth installment of *The Elder Scrolls* series of games, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, published in November 2011 by Bethesda Game Studios, based in Maryland, USA; and lastly, *Jotun*, created by Thunder Lotus Games of Montreal and released in 2016. These games have been selected as they reveal a progression in the indirect versus direct use of medieval sources mentioned above. They also reveal the international provenance of high medieval fantasy, sometimes extending beyond the borders of Europe or America. These games, in much the same way as Tolkien's books, strongly influenced the genre of medieval fantasy in the new medium of electronic games, and entranced many young gamers throughout their childhoods and teenage years into adulthood with their stories and rich worlds.

This phenomenon, while enacted on new forms of media such as film and video games, produces similar effects in its audiences as traditional methods of storytelling have historically done, shaping societies' understandings of the world and their memories, both new and old. The above games will be analyzed with respect to this process, looking at how they receive and transform the medieval material and the memories of the north to create new memories and instantiations of culture. For looking at the reception of medieval Germanic culture on a broader scale and in processual terms, more than one game is needed to discern these wider trends.

At the same time, though in highly limited fashion, references will be made to other sources revealing the same phenomenon of fascination with Vikings and medieval culture, particularly in film and television. These references will be very brief, mostly in name only, as one of the virtues of discussing contemporary popular culture is that the majority of readers can be assumed to know (or at least to have heard about) the most famous titles mentioned.

## **Importance and Relevance**

Over the past 10-15 years, popular culture has become more and more saturated with notions of the Scandinavian past, particularly Vikings and the Norse gods. While much of this is aesthetic treatment, it is nonetheless laden with issues related to the concurrent rise in extremist, nationalist politics concerning race and white Europeanness that has also tapped into this medieval material to suit its own agendas, resulting in similarly barbaric rhetorical strategies as those espoused during the early 20th century in Europe, particularly in Nazi Germany. This is significant as dealing with Norse medieval material became somewhat taboo following WWII, and its current popularity is the first time since then that returning directly to the source, as it were, has become “acceptable” again broadly in Western society. Thus, shows like *Vikings* can exist without risking being labeled questionable for its subject matter, historicity aside.

As discussed above, Tolkien’s global popularization of the literature, mythology, art, and culture of the medieval North Atlantic world through his authorial adaptations created an indirect link between the sources and the present genre of medieval fantasy, which his works came to define. In the past decade and a half or so, this indirect link represented by Tolkien’s influence has become no longer the sole, dominant expression of medieval Germanic influence in modern popular culture, as it has become more socially acceptable to once again return directly to the source material that Tolkien himself drew upon. However, this is not without problems, as mentioned above, for while society may no longer frown upon aesthetic treatments centering on the phenomenon of Vikings and medieval Germanic culture, there are highly questionable groups drawing concurrently on the same body of material for more political ends. In response to this rise in the use and abuse of this material, it is our responsibility as scholars devoted to the field to remain critical and maintain open discourses on what can and cannot be argued according to the sources, and, if possible, to communicate such a mindset to broader audiences.

As the world becomes more interconnected and globalized, we have seen how regressive, often nationalistic and xenophobic tendencies have been on the rise as a fear-induced response, and notions of a “pure” Scandinavian past that echoes in white European ethnic pride today have become an arena for such ideologies and discourses. For instance, Peter Burke has reasoned that the rise in popular interest in memory and older iterations of cultures is likely a “reaction to the acceleration of social and cultural change that threatens

identities by dividing what we are from what we were.”<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note that, at the same time, current research into the medieval North has yielded results that point to a more globally interconnected and heterogeneous reality than was previously thought.<sup>8</sup>

Scandinavians were excellent mariners, and while most famed for their raiding, they also prevailed at trade and commerce, engaging with networks that connected them with some of the far reaches of the known world. The Baltic and North Sea region can also be seen as a kind of economic and cultural entity akin to the way the Mediterranean world is perceived, but in the far north of Europe. At the same time, the greatest legacy of the Viking Age were the various colonizations carried out by these groups, both of empty and occupied lands. While raiding and returning to one’s homeland certainly occurred, many people chose to move across dramatic distances and settle in new places, for one reason or another.

At the same time, the wider western canon of popular history has often neglected or mistreated the Germanic constituents of Europe, relegating them to footnotes of the stories of the great continental civilizations of classical Greece and Rome, and the inheritors of those legacies in the lands that would become the modern European nations. My own experience in educational systems in the United States has demonstrated such treatments, where the Middle Ages are treated as an inconvenient obstacle between classics and renaissances (terms like “Dark Ages” come to mind). These important chapters in the story of Europe, and Europe as a part of the story of the world, could only be found if sought out, and are thus denied students in survey and introductory history classes. Such historiographical concerns in fact lay at the roots of the conception of the present study, and at its heart in what it seeks to do.

Referring to the use and abuse of the medieval literature of the North that is becoming ever more popular mentioned before, a cultural corpus’ vulnerability to such abuses is born principally from ignorance of it, or worse from the purposeful spread of misinformation, both of which can be seen during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and in today’s precarious position of the Norse/Germanic material. It is rather necessary to consider the Scandinavian north, then, no longer as something far away and peripheral, but as an integral part of the European story, as some Scandinavianists have sought to do in recent decades in the realms of political and religious history.<sup>9</sup> This inclusion should be considered at a deeper level as well, namely in

---

<sup>7</sup> Peter Burke, *What is Cultural History?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 67. Found referenced in Di Filippo, “Contemporary Popular Culture,” in *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies*, 382.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Anders Winroth, *The Conversion of Scandinavia: Vikings, Merchants, and Missionaries in the Remaking of Northern Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. works such as Winroth, *The Conversion of Scandinavia; Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy: Scandinavia, Central Europe, and Rus’ c. 900-1200*, ed. Nora Berend (New York: Cambridge

culture and literature, for it is becoming more widely accepted that the Norse-Icelandic literary corpus, unique and brilliant though it may be, was not created in a vacuum, but was shaped as a set of related literary genres in response to and interaction with the imported continental literatures that came on the backs of Christianity and kingship.<sup>10</sup> This process opened up a conversation between the literary systems of north and south, one of mutual (but perhaps not equal) exchange.

Further, it is important to consider that in the power vacuum created by the collapse of the western Roman empire in the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE, it was Germanic groups and peoples that took their place during the so-called “Barbarian Successor States” period, establishing kingdoms from Iberia to Eastern Europe. This includes of course that most successful power, the kingdom of the Franks, which would become in the late 8<sup>th</sup> and early 9<sup>th</sup> century the most powerful empire in Western Europe, with political, social, and cultural legacies that underpin European history from that point on into the present day. This is to say, while most certainly not purely Scandinavian, the story of the West is one in which Germanic peoples play a much larger role than often credited with in current historiographical paradigms, to say nothing of popular conceptions of European history (where imprecise terms such as “Barbarian Successor States” prevail). While Greece and Rome indeed laid the groundwork of Europe in cultural, political, economic, and (especially) infrastructural terms, this frame was filled in over the next millennium and a half with cultural and social elements of Germanic-speaking peoples, who in turn took advantage of, built upon, and developed the classical roots of those civilizations.

This is all to say that Scandinavia and its stories are a unique but connected part of a whole, less well-known cultural makeup of the modern West, a part which is often not given its proper dues as an important part of Western storytelling traditions. This material should not be neglected as it has been, and its significance in above all, in my opinion, storytelling and memorial traditions is an integral part of European conceptions of the world, even past the paradigmatic break represented by the de-spiritualizing influences of the Enlightenment. Since that perceptual shift, in recent times it has been observed<sup>11</sup> that the West is undergoing

---

University Press, 2007). Also Viðar Pálsson, *Language of Power: Feasting and Gift-Giving in Medieval Iceland and its Sagas* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Library, 2016), where the author illuminates the continental roots of the discourses of power and social relations found in Icelandic and Norwegian medieval culture.

<sup>10</sup> Cf., for example, Siân E. Grønlie, *The Saint and the Saga Hero: Hagiography and Early Icelandic Literature* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Kennet Granholm, “‘Sons of Northern Darkness’: Heathen influences in Black Metal and Neofolk Music,” *Numen* 58, no. 4 (2011): 514-544; and Stefanie von Schnurbein, “Germanic Neopaganism – A Nordic Art-Religion?” in *Norse Revival: Transformations of Germanic Neopaganism* (Leiden: Brill, 2016). Both texts discuss the spiritualizing aspects of cultural activities, such as music in Granholm and literature in Schnurbein,

a process of re-enchantment, in which people are becoming dissatisfied with the reductionistic materialism that has become dominant, and are seeking alternative modes of thought and perception that resonate more with pre-Enlightenment cultures.<sup>12</sup> Naturally, people are looking back to the past for answers, and it is in this climate, of the “acceleration of social and cultural change which threatens identities” and of processes of re-enchantment and new waves of romanticism, in which the current rise of Scandinavian subjects in popular culture has occurred.

---

and how the arts have been used as substitutes for the meaning-making capacities formerly monopolized by institutionalized religion. These cultural activities are further accessed as avenues by which older belief systems, such as Scandinavian Pre-Christian religions, can be channeled and brought forth into the present day as alternative religious systems.

<sup>12</sup> One realm in which this disillusionment with the present state of modernity, with globally-advanced industrialized capitalism and of perceived cultural hollowness, is that of extreme metal, a socio-musical phenomenon that has been argued to possess meaning-making capacities beyond the normal potentials of other genres of music which do not carry cultural systems in the same way. Black Metal in particular, of Scandinavian and English origin, heavily romanticizes pre-Christian Germanic cultures as their “true” hereditary culture, which has been poisoned and usurped by Christianization. Thus, heavily dualistic in perceptions of time and decay, these extreme forms of metal scenes and their associated ideologies have diversified into a number of different sub-genres, each with loosely cohesive worldviews and inspirations. Nonetheless, Black Metal with Nordic and pagan influences (as well as other subgenres with other occult and mythical inspirations) are a good example of the larger phenomena at work with regard to the reception of medieval Germanic cultures that this study is concerned with.



# CHAPTER I

## A NEW FRAMEWORK FOR NEW MEDIA

### Introduction

In order to establish the framework for analyzing the selected video games and their cultural impacts, I will draw on diverse disciplines ranging from French structuralism to advanced narratological theory dealing with new media, and from literary and memory studies concerned with reception and the formation of new and old literary traditions and collectives. This construction will also lay the groundwork for future studies in this vein going forward. At its core, this thesis addresses the hows and whys of the global cultural construction of the “North”<sup>13</sup>: what does this idea entail, what does it make people imagine when they hear references to it or when they encounter it more directly as an idea either in real life or in cultural artifacts? How did it come about? What is the chain of receptions connecting the present perception of it back into the past? What kinds of ideologies are associated with it? More specifically, how do video games as a new and vivid medium of storytelling and immersion contribute to this construction in recent years? While certainly not all of these questions can be answered in the present study, and those that can may not have exact and definite answers to be found, this is the direction in which I am aiming. For even if no definitive answers are found, as is the case in many realms of scholarship, illuminations of new particularities, new subtleties, are sure to be revealed.

Since I shall be dealing with several large questions that rely on categories and modes of thought of varying levels of precision, it seems prudent to proceed from the most general and wide to the more focused and particular, drawing both together in case study portion of this paper. This is loosely guided by Gérard Genette’s theory of narrative discourse, in which he states, “I must therefore recognize that in seeking the specific I find the universal...that the general is at the heart of the particular, and therefore (contrary to the common preconception) the knowable is at the heart of the mysterious.”<sup>14</sup> All works are unique (re)combinations of universal or archetypal elements that are common to human cultures, assemblages whose construction is guided by the accepted and preferred repertoires of the specific times, places, and cultures in which they are created. In this sense, one seeks specific iterations to find examples of the universal, as in literary studies and narratology, and thus what is ‘universal’ is inherently based upon, maintained, and contributed to by the specific.

---

<sup>13</sup> “North” will be used to refer to the constructed, mental image of the region and its history, while North, without quotation marks, refers to the region itself in reality.

<sup>14</sup> Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: an Essay in Method* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 23.

While Genette and the vast majority of narratologists dealt in literature and the written word, to which I will also be referring in the form of the medieval literature of northern Europe, the new media this study is concerned with represent the transposition of elements of cultural works more or less intact (if not expounded upon and given new and vivid degrees of realization) from traditional media of text and visual art into those such as film, television, and electronic games.

### **The Heterotopia**

This thesis deals with questions of both spatial and temporal dimensions, which befits both the themes of world<sup>15</sup>, in the real sense, and the narrative concept of ‘storyworld,’ which interrelate and influence one another, as will be shown later. However, I would like to begin here with the first plane, that of space, which plays an important role in the mental constructions of the “North.” The structuralist philosophy of Michel Foucault can be of service in establishing the rudimentary outlines of the type of space we are dealing with; indeed, Foucault even proclaimed that “the present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space...[and] that the anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with space, no doubt a great deal more than with time.”<sup>16</sup> In a short paper, Foucault outlines the concept of “heterotopia,” a kind of “other place” that is different from the term which it modifies, the utopia, which is a space that does not exist in reality and reflects a perfected form of a given society. By contrast, heterotopias can be located in real places. Furthermore, like utopian visions, Foucault asserts that it is likely that every culture in the world has a heterotopia, but that such constructs vary considerably through time and cultural context, so that no two heterotopias will ever be the same (and within a single culture, its designated heterotopia can change with its development and with historical events).<sup>17</sup> The principle feature of heterotopias are that they “are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.”<sup>18</sup> Foucault attempts to illustrate this concept, connecting both utopia and heterotopia, through the metaphor of the mirror; it exists

---

<sup>15</sup> Consider the Old Norse word *veröld*, “world,” comprised of the elements *ver* from Latin *vir*, “man, human being” and *öld*, “age, era”. Together the literal meaning “age of mankind” makes plain the medieval perception of the world as intrinsically linked with, indeed defined by, time, and specifically the time in which humanity exists. It is a signifier whose elements are temporal in nature, yet what it signifies is spatial, neatly encapsulating both planes.

<sup>16</sup> Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias,” transl. Jay Miskowicz, *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité* (October 1984): 2.

<sup>17</sup> Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 3-4.

<sup>18</sup> Foucault, “Of Other Space,” 3.

as a real object, a go between, through which we see ourselves in a non-reality on the other side, a utopia of the “placeless place,” yet which “exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that [we] occupy.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, heterotopias are reflective in nature, with additional potential to invert and critique that which they resemble or represent.

Other key principles (or types) of heterotopias are that their respective society, “as its history unfolds, can make an existing heterotopia function in a very different fashion,”<sup>20</sup> and further, that they “are most often linked with slices in time...and begin to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time.”<sup>21</sup> In addition, the function of heterotopias is defined by their relations to all other types of spaces in a society, one possibility of which is to “create a space that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled.”<sup>22</sup> It is here that some alterations must be made in order to adapt this concept for this thesis. These ‘principles’ of heterotopias are four of the six which Foucault lists, as the remaining two<sup>23</sup> are not really applicable. Yet neither am I attempting to argue that this idea of the “North” is a heterotopia, as Foucault defines it, but rather that this mental space has heterotopic qualities which allow analysis through such a concept. The North is a real space, the regions of northern Europe that comprise (mainly) Scandinavia, Iceland, the Baltics, and to a certain extent the British Isles (while culturally this is certainly true in the Middle Ages, English, Irish, and Scottish people would not be considered ‘Scandinavian’ to the general perceptions of the rest of Europe and America). However, the *idea* of the “North” is invested with sundry mental features and attributes that are both culturally and temporally dependent. Consider, for example, what the idea of the “North” meant to the *volkisch* national romantics of late-19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> century Germany in comparison to what it meant to contemporaneous figures from different cultures, such as Tolkien, or what it means to Euro-Americans nowadays, and how each group made use of that idea. Thus, the same heterotopic, real-and-not-real space holds different meanings for different cultures, meanings which can also change internally in those same cultures over time, so that the same imagined space is able to contain multiple non-identical cultural landscapes and mental projections. These mental constructions may

---

<sup>19</sup> Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 4.

<sup>20</sup> Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 5.

<sup>21</sup> Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 6.

<sup>22</sup> Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 8.

<sup>23</sup> One is that heterotopias are capable of juxtaposing several sites or places within them which are incompatible and absolutely do not overlap, and the other is that heterotopias “presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable,” as they are generally not places that are freely accessible in a public sense (see pages 6 and 7 of the same paper).

share similar features and even appear identical at a glance, but the meanings they hold for particular societies or groups that they thus reflect would be very different. Lastly, it is interesting to note that, in a world that is predominantly delineated (at least in the Western mindset) politically and culturally between “East” and “West,” the “North” is something other, something far away and somewhat isolated, untouched by the issues of the rest of the world.<sup>24</sup>

### **Polysystem Theory**

The next concept in the framework is the *polysystem theory* developed by Itamar Even-Zohar, who expounded upon systemic theories of the late-19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> century in the Genevan, Czech, and Russian schools of formalism and structuralism, bringing into harmony their seemingly conflicting approaches to create a useful methodology applicable to any field of semiotics. The systemic approach, at the fundamental level, represented the switch from identifying and cataloguing scientific data to identifying the laws and phenomena which operate behind such data, that which causes them to arise, as a *functional* approach to relations between diverse phenomena rather than the study of them individually.<sup>25</sup> *Polysystem theory* reconciles some of the aforementioned tensions between the two main types of functionalist system studies, synchronic and diachronic; the former sought to abstract the systemic object of study and reduce it to its principle parts and to thus understand how it functions, while the latter retained the element of temporality in its approaches. For a long time, the synchronic path, misinterpreted as static, became the defining feature of structuralism, while the diachronic, dynamic method was left by the wayside, at least until Even-Zohar resurrected it. By his reckoning, both have a purpose and must be considered equally historical, while a-historical methods of reductionism and homogenous systemic theories must be eliminated.<sup>26</sup> As its name implies, the polysystem approach means leaving behind the static and homogenous closed system conception, and opening up systems to the acknowledgment of their macro-relations, those between numerous

---

<sup>24</sup> Ideas along these lines are addressed and discussed in *Images of the North: Histories – Identities – Ideas*, ed. Sverrir Jakobsson (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2009). For example, in “Images of the North: Address by the President of Iceland, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson,” the former president noted how, after the conclusion of the Cold War, “in a short time, the North has been drawn from the fringes of international affairs into the center focus of global events.”

<sup>25</sup> Itamar Even-Zohar, “Polysystem Theory,” *Poetics Today* 11, no. 1 (Spring 1990), 9-10.

<sup>26</sup> Even-Zohar, “Polysystem Theory,” 11.

and varied systems in a web of dynamic relations, within which both synchronic and diachronic axes are at work.<sup>27</sup> More artfully outlined:

...if the idea of structuredness and systemicity need no longer be identified with homogeneity, a semiotic system can be conceived of as a heterogeneous, open structure...[and thus as a] polysystem—a multiple system, a system of various systems which intersect with each other and partly overlap, using concurrently different options, yet functioning as one structured whole, whose members are interdependent.<sup>28</sup>

These various systems and their differing options are hierarchized within the greater polysystem and are observed to be “competing” with one another as they play out an historical drama, driving other systems and being driven themselves to and from central, prime positions. At the same time, there is not one center and periphery, but multiple, as several positions can be hypothesized to exist within the polysystem.<sup>29</sup>

In seeking to discover *why* and *how* such transfers take place (questions that have become central to applications of polysystem theory), a critical factor is the phenomena which take place within polysystem relations at the level of repertoire. “That is to say, the polysystem constraints turn out to be relevant for the procedures of selection, manipulation, amplification, deletion, etc., taking place in actual products (verbal as well as non-verbal) pertaining to the polysystem.”<sup>30</sup> While mainly used in fields of language and literature, it is plain to see here how polysystem theory may also apply in nearly any field of semiotics, including those dealing with contemporary media, as all such systems maintain commonalities in their construction via ideas, words, memories, imagination, etc., and the rules governing the combinations of such elements. For a working definition, Even-Zohar gives the following: “Repertoire is conceived of here as the aggregate of laws and elements (either single, bound, or total models) that govern the production of texts. While some of these laws and elements seem to be universally valid since the world’s first literatures, clearly a great many laws and elements are subjected to shifting conditions in different periods and cultures.”<sup>31</sup> The tensions between various repertoires, either within a single system or belonging each to their own, within the greater polysystem are an integral part of the engine that powers such transfers to and from the peripheries and centers.

---

<sup>27</sup> Even-Zohar, “Polysystem Theory,” 11.

<sup>28</sup> Even-Zohar, “Polysystem Theory,” 11.

<sup>29</sup> Even-Zohar, “Polysystem Theory,” 14.

<sup>30</sup> Even-Zohar, “Polysystem Theory,” 15.

<sup>31</sup> Even-Zohar, “Polysystem Theory,” 17-18.

Repertoire-based systemic phenomena contribute to the formation and dissolution of literary canons, both as conservative models that have achieved central positions and thus seek to maintain them, and as innovatory ones that form or arrive on a periphery and either remain there or, when a central repertoire can no longer fulfill certain functions or has become petrified, penetrate the central position and possibly replace the prior models.<sup>32</sup> Such “interference,” as he calls it, is also possible to hypothesize at the inter-systemic level; all semiotic systems are part of the larger polysystem of the “total culture” of a given society, and such polysystems are in turn part of a “mega-polysystem” which controls several communities, the borders of which are never static and are constantly in flux.<sup>33</sup> Thus, new, heretofore ‘unexplainable’ elements that penetrate a system can often be explained through accounting for the peripheral systems and those adjacent polysystems which have observable effects upon them.

In the drama of polysystem relations, heterogeneity is a key trait, both in the development of younger systems on their journey towards stability, but also in the maintenance of existing polysystems. For this reason, Even-Zohar posits that, in polysystem theory, the “law of proliferation seems to be universally valid,” which states that “in order to fulfill its needs, a system actually strives to avail itself of a growing inventory of alternative options.”<sup>34</sup> If such a process is successful, then it is likely that the “home inventory” will suffice for the healthy function of the (poly)system, except in the event of drastic changes, when inter-systemic transferring becomes the decisive solution to lapses in the ability of such a home inventory to fulfill its purposes.<sup>35</sup>

In viewing polysystem theory with respect to literary and, in particular, cultural semiotic systems, we should consider the “North” and its relational systems of cultural material. In terms of literature, the polysystem of the “North” includes those “canonical” texts that make up the body of material from which the modern Romantics drew, such as the Icelandic sagas, eddic and skaldic poetry, kings’ sagas, and so on. What literature, both native and foreign (there are a few external accounts, such as Tacitus and Ibn Fadlan), does not tell us is gleaned from archaeology, which is used either independently or in tandem with the literature (as a kind of “proof” of what in literary accounts may be verified as at least partially factual, especially in constructing the pre-Christian cultures). However, given that we are

---

<sup>32</sup> Even-Zohar, “Polysystem Theory,” 19; 25.

<sup>33</sup> Even-Zohar, “Polysystem Theory,” 23-24.

<sup>34</sup> Even-Zohar, “Polysystem Theory,” 25-26.

<sup>35</sup> Even-Zohar, “Polysystem Theory,” 25-26.

dealing less with the reality of the medieval North than with common mental and imaginative perceptions of it, a slew of other material must be accounted for, such as: prominent cultural-aesthetic features (interlace ornament, animal styles, runic writing, and more); notions about the dress and equipment of the quintessential “Viking” warrior (more or less sourced from archaeological finds including weapons, armor, ships, textile fragments, and other accoutrements); attitudes and behaviors associated with northern peoples (principally the notion of the raiding Viking, but also mixed in with sometimes conflicting ideas of a ‘Viking bushido’ code of honor and courage, and a general air of austerity and staunch-heartedness birthed from their cold, harsh environs); and numerous other aspects that could be fleshed out in future studies of this kind. In addition to attempting to map a polysystem of ideas related to the “North,” one must also account for polysystems of the varying receptions of this material (such as those by aforementioned romantics) which lie in between the original, medieval material and the public perceptions of such material, and which overlap and interact with each other.

### **Historical Precedents: Romanticism, Nationalism, Systemic Movements**

Thinking along lines of the historical movement of this Northern polysystem, the recent rise in popularity is certainly not without precedent (although its scale can certainly be argued to be so). As mentioned earlier, WWII and Nazi ideology’s exploitation of Scandinavian myth and culture saw that material put in bad taste for public consumption, yet before that it was a very popular repertoire. The Viking Age was a source of pride, both for Scandinavian nations and other Europeans who felt a kinship to that past, such as Germany, but also for the colonizers of the New World, where a tradition of comparing politicians to the Vikings emerged early on as a part of the process of identity crafting and national mythology. Stephen A. Mitchell has commented on this phenomenon, noting how fascination with the medieval north in the U.S. is evident from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onward, owed in large part to the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and resulting in fantastical theories like that of the genealogist Albert Welles, who argued in 1879 that George Washington was a descendent of Óðinn.<sup>36</sup> Lectures by a former chaplain of the New York State Senate, Asahel

---

<sup>36</sup> Stephen A. Mitchell, “U.S. Perspectives,” in *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, eds. Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann, & Stephen Mitchell (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 866-867.

Davis, about the truth of pre-Columbian Scandinavian contacts with the New World were so popular they were printed in thirteen editions between 1839 and 1845.<sup>37</sup>

Meanwhile, in England, famously home to the sites of both the inauguration and closure of the Viking Age (Lindisfarne, 793 and Stamford Bridge, 1066), narratives about the horrors of Viking raids became recast into a glorification of Scandinavian settlement of the British Isles. Victorians had need of an imperial past on which to model themselves and to construct national identity, and found the Roman presence in Britain to be lacking and distasteful to their sensibilities (Romans as effeminate Mediterraneans), and so turned to the Scandinavian settlement in northeastern England.<sup>38</sup> The Viking presence thus became the precondition for the British imperial successes then being enjoyed in the Victorian era, and the negative memories of the Viking attacks were reformulated “to emphasise the legacy of cultural enrichment (and in the troubling parlance of the Victorians, particularly *racial* enrichment) afforded by the arrival of the Vikings in Britain.”<sup>39</sup>

In Germany, Romantic overemphasis of the connection between German culture and ethnicity to the medieval north is a more well-known phenomenon in the public sphere, due to its consequences of the Holocaust and WWII. Stefanie von Schnurbein’s recent book on Germanic Neopaganism, *Norse Revival*, outlines the two major, modern periods when the fascination with the Scandinavian past crystallized into developed ideologies, which prefigure their modern accessibility and adaptation: German Romanticism, ca. 1800, and the *Völkisch* nationalism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The former was created when German intellectuals (especially Johann Gottfried Herder and Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm) systematized “ideas about a holistic unity of natural environment, language and history located in a deep past and in rural populations,” with the position that “this unity and its expression in an indigenous mythological heritage were perceived as necessary foundation for a proper nation or *Volk*.”<sup>40</sup> Schnurbein further illustrates how the German construction of Romantic Nordicism, as well as those of other contemporary nations, was influenced by and built upon ideas already existing in Renaissance humanism related to the study of classics, particularly the expansion of interest in Greco-Roman mythology and philosophy to include Norse myth, and the study

---

<sup>37</sup> Mitchell, “U.S. Perspectives,” 868. Public interest in this pre-Columbian connection resurged when the theory was verified by the discovery of Norse archaeological evidence at L’anse Aux Meadows, Newfoundland, in the 1960s.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Cole, “British Perspectives,” in *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, eds. Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann, & Stephen Mitchell (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 894-895.

<sup>39</sup> Richard Cole, “British Perspectives,” 891.

<sup>40</sup> Stefanie Von Schnurbein, *Norse Revival: Transformations of Germanic Neopaganism* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 17.



of literature about Germanic peoples by Caesar, Tacitus, and Jordanes.<sup>41</sup> Through philological arguments based primarily on the linguistic adjacency of German and Scandinavian languages, Norse mythology became an anchoring point for German nation building projects, as Roland Scheel demonstrates with a case study of the rhetorical strategies of Otto von Bismarck.<sup>42</sup> Along with Richard Wagner's aesthetic stage treatments of Norse mythology, "these scholars firmly established an idealized image of a mythic national past..."<sup>43</sup> This ideology of cultural nationalism was adopted by other cultures (the Scandinavian nations, Britain and the U.S.) who saw themselves as having Germanic origins.<sup>44</sup>

Another important sphere of the influence of the polysystem of the "North" and its preconditions to modern forms and positioning is the Norse-inspired fiction that Schnurbein devotes a chapter to. With respect to her focus on the modern revival of Norse paganism, she describes how the aesthetic and artistic treatments of the medieval material form an important part of the source-pool of modern neopagans' inspiration. Her focus is on the works of Wagner and Tolkien, as two figures whose influence was international and who represent most poignantly the two generations at the apex of Nordic Romanticism, although others are mentioned as well. They were the most influential in the "popularization of the discourse of Nordic myth, as well as art-religion [an interesting term she uses to denote modern spiritual affinity for aesthetic and individualized approaches to religion] itself and its transformation into alternative spiritual practice."<sup>45</sup> Like my own views on the matter, Schnurbein also acknowledges Tolkien's profound influence after the 1960s on perceptions of European folklore and mythology, and that his writing laid the groundwork for the genre of modern fantasy, across media.<sup>46</sup> In discussing these kinds of discourses around Norse mythology and literature, Schnurbein emphasizes the importance of various forms of modern culture (music, religion, literature, plays, games, etc.) in the processes of disseminating this "constellation of Nordic art-religion to a broader international public."<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*, 18-20. The author outlines here how the various European countries influenced one another in their similar approaches to this material in the beginnings of nation-building projects.

<sup>42</sup> Roland Scheel, "German Perspectives," in *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies*, 913-920.

<sup>43</sup> Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*, 24.

<sup>44</sup> Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*, 25. The author goes on to discuss the challenge German Romanticism presented to the Scandinavian nations, whose scholars criticized the appropriation of pre-Christian Norse religion by Germans and formulated their own national constructions of the Norse mythic material.

<sup>45</sup> Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*, 299.

<sup>46</sup> Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*, 309.

<sup>47</sup> Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*, 347.

Her use of the term “constellation” here is important to consider, as it points to the kind of functionalist understandings of cultural systems and repertoires for themes, motifs, and types outlined above. *Norse Revival* provides an important and in-depth survey of the historical developments in attitudes and appropriations of medieval Norse culture as it conceives of these developments in a processual manner, and relates them and their cultural products to one another in a web-like structure indicated by the word choice “constellation.” Schnurbein, in tandem with others such as Scheel, provides the basis for envisioning how the medieval material as a polysystem has related to its neighboring systems, and how the repertoire within it has shifted between central and peripheral positions in the larger cultural polysystems of the West. While she is focused on these historical preconditions as they feed into the religious revivals of pre-Christian Norse beliefs today, her attention to artistic works such as Tolkien’s is also relevant to the goals of this thesis in considering popular culture and public perceptions of the “North.” To expound on her narrative, however, it is pertinent to consider how the material has been used in modern popular culture of late, with a main question being whether the Northern polysystem itself has drifted towards the centers of various interdependent systems of popular entertainment media, or if it remains in a peripheral spot but elements from its repertoire are being borrowed to the center?<sup>48</sup> This will be considered in detail later on in the applied portion of this thesis, as well as returning to Schnurbein’s considerations of the historical processes of the discourse of Norse mythology.

### **The Storyworld: Formulating the “North” as Mental Landscape**

Next, we turn to the field of narratology, which has formulated a concept known as the *storyworld* to account for the deep worlds that surround the narrative events and characters, typically in literature. The storyworld is different from the textual plot and setting in the sense of what is shown versus what is actually “there” in the ontological sense, indicating the “reality” of the textual world beyond the “here” and “now” of the narrative itself, and including both intradiegetic and extradiegetic elements.<sup>49</sup> For an easy reference point, bringing it once again back to Tolkien, a large part of the appeal of *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* can be argued to be related to the depth and nuance of detail defining the

---

<sup>48</sup> Even-Zohar outlines the possibilities of this phenomenon of borrowing elements from peripheral systems into central systems in his articles following up to “Polysystem Theory,” “The ‘Literary System’” and “The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem,” *Poetics* 11, no. 1 (1990), 27-51.

<sup>49</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan, “Texts, Worlds, Stories: Narrative Worlds as Cognitive and Ontological Concept,” in *Narrative Theory, Literature, and New Media: Narrative Minds and Virtual Worlds*, eds. Mari Hatavara, Matti Hyvärinen, Maria Mäkelä, & Frans Mäyrä (New York: Routledge, 2016), 13.

world of Middle Earth, that which is both detailed in the books and that which is *implied*, a key concept in the narrative storyworld. In this sense, world-building, the aptly-named process of constructing a fictional world from the ground up, creating the structural and relational elements that will surround, enmesh, and grant meaning to the plot and characters of the narrative, is largely tied to the literary fictional genres of science fiction and fantasy, which both deal with alien worlds that attract and entrance our imaginations. It is little wonder then that video games, which can be generally said to rely on their immersive qualities as a medium, both make significant use of world-building and principally fall into categories of science fiction or fantasy, or hybrids thereof in some cases. This concept has been expounded upon in recent years by necessity of the explosion of new media formats and the evolution of modern storytelling, bringing attention to the phenomenon of *transmedia storytelling*.

Building upon the idea of an ontologically-complete (either implied or explicit), created storyworld in which the plot and characters of the narrative are enmeshed, *transmedial storytelling* refers to when a storyworld is engaged with and utilized across different storytelling platforms, ranging between literature, comics, film, television, computer games, and other media. Different instantiations all make meaningful contributions to the collective storyworld, telling different stories in different manners about one ontological “world,” using a variety of media. While particularly widespread today, this is not a purely modern phenomenon, thinking of the “multiple medial incarnations of Greek myth and biblical narratives,”<sup>50</sup> and in a more relevant case, the transmedial *sagaworld* comprised of a variety of oral and textual versions and performances of tales belonging to a more or less coherent storyworld. A particularly useful definition of this concept has been articulated by Lisbeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca, discussing the fan reception of a transmedia marketing campaign for the release of HBO’s television series *Game of Thrones*:

*Transmedial worlds* are abstract content systems from which a repertoire of fictional stories can be actualized or derived across a variety of media forms [...] that is, TMWs are mental constructs shared by both designers/creators of the world and the audience/participants. The TMW is not defined by the material entity of any particular instantiation (the media platform) but by the shared idea of the world, a sort of platonic approach that situates the ontological status of the TMW in a disembodied plane.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon. “Storyworlds Across Media: Introduction,” in *Storyworlds Across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*, eds. Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon (Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 3.

<sup>51</sup> Lisbeth Klastrup and Susana Tosca, “*Game of Thrones*: Transmedial Worlds, Fandom, and Social Gaming,” in *Storyworlds Across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*, eds. Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon (Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, 2014), 296-7.

This concept can be applied beneficially to the present objective of defining and analyzing a mental storyworld of the “North.” It is a kind of heterotopia that exists in the real world but which is overridden in its realness by popular constructions, of which there are many varieties but which share certain governing features; further, it is a cultural polysystem informed by literary systems of medieval sources and modern romantic receptions and re-articulations. Thus, we have a mental and emotional world invested with a variety of meanings, symbols, and literary tropes that have become suffused throughout the popular sphere over time and through processes of *retextualization*, such that everyone experiences certain images and ideas when imagining the “North.” These images are not strictly identical but certainly similar and form a loosely coherent thought-construction which lends itself to the creation of numerous stories on a variety of media platforms. These stories either take place within such an imagined space or storyworld, contain a version of the “North” within a larger, integrated storyworld, or reference it with the implication of ontological completeness. What I seek to demonstrate later is that this heterotopic, polysystemic, transmedial storyworld has become an increasingly popular source of new cultural products and a favored repertoire for story elements in recent years.

### **Aesthetic Illusion: The Immersive Power of Storyworlds in Action**

Having established a framework for analyzing how the “North” is a constructed repository for ideas and emotions which is mentally mapped upon a real space in the north of Europe, I shall turn to the specific characteristics of games as the medium of choice for this thesis. Games are by nature a highly-interactive, multimedia platform that incorporates visuals, audio, narrative, and cognitive functions which create the preconditions for varying degrees of immersion, depending on the genre and style of game. The storyworlds created by games thus have the potential to be much more vivid and immediate to the perception of players than another narrative medium like literary fiction. “Aesthetic illusion” refers to a specific kind of experience which activates the imagination in a desired way that can be deployed in various media, including electronic games. It has been explored at length in a collection of articles titled *Immersion and Distance: Aesthetic Illusion in Literature and Other Media*, co-edited by the literary and media theorist Werner Wolf, who has studied aesthetic illusion for much of his professional career. In his introduction to the collection, Wolf characterizes aesthetic illusion as something which is elicited in the audience by engagement with a cultural artifact (whether literary, pictorial, musical, or otherwise) in a

gradable manner (between complete immersion and total, rational distance) which is primarily an emotional state of mind.<sup>52</sup> An important point he makes is that illusionist works play a more active role in the feeling created in the viewer than with other acts of reception; the interaction between viewer and object/performance is never one-sided, but works that elicit aesthetic illusion “strongly guide the nature of the imaginative experience (and thus go beyond a mere initial trigger, as in the case of seeing a holiday poster and starting a daydream).”<sup>53</sup> They thus have the power to create similar experiences across different audiences, though probably never identical.

The most common triggers of aesthetic illusion are representational works because they are able to imply (either partly or in whole) elements of possible worlds or of the real world, in varying degrees of complexity (with reference to Tolkien’s Middle Earth as a highly complex world).<sup>54</sup> Wolf argues convincingly that *experience*, broadly defined as anything that can consciously happen to humans (both inner and outer), is the bottom line for both real life and the phenomenon termed aesthetic illusion: “[experience] is the common denominator and centre of both our lived relationship to, perception of, and participation in the real world and aesthetic illusion as a perception of and participation in an imaginary world.”<sup>55</sup> This phenomenological approach, which places human perception at the center of a web of relations between the self and the world(s) perceived, is a key part of understanding aesthetic illusion. The experiential nature of this phenomenon also entails a perspectival shift which is important to highlight. Rather than simply viewing illusionist objects from a distance, as with less immersive works,

they also, and primarily, invite us to bracket off the constant awareness of our centre of perspective, our *hic et nunc* situation, and thus induce us to become ‘*recentered*’ in them in our imagination. As a consequence, illusionist representations allow us to experience these worlds as well as what exists and happens within them as if from the inside. As a further consequence we seem no longer to be distanced observers of a representation, let alone a representation of some past events and happenings (in fiction often one transmitted in the narrative past tense). Rather we seem to forget about the pastness (where applicable) or about the fact that the artifact was once made by an artist or author, and re-experience the illusionist world as re-presented, as something rendered present to us like real life...<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Werner Wolf, “Aesthetic Illusion,” in *Immersion and Distance: Aesthetic Illusion in Literature and Other Media*, eds. Werner Wolf, Walter Bernhart and Andreas Mahler (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2013), 6-7; 10.

<sup>53</sup> Wolf, “Aesthetic Illusion,” 9.

<sup>54</sup> Wolf, “Aesthetic Illusion,” 11.

<sup>55</sup> Wolf, “Aesthetic Illusion,” 13.

<sup>56</sup> Wolf, “Aesthetic Illusion,” 11.

This description of the potential and function of illusionist representation fits rather perfectly with what Ryan has said about storyworlds, as the implied world stretching beyond the narrative here and now. As it is principally the genres of fantasy and science fiction in which one sees the storyworld most prominently, created through the process of world-building which often precedes such fiction, it is clear these kinds of narratives fall under the category of illusionist representations that Wolf describes. If the ontologically-complete world that is hinted at or illustrated surrounding the plot and characters is the storyworld, then the immersion in that storyworld which is created by skilled authorial depiction is the phenomenon of aesthetic illusion. This link is thus a bridge between these two theories that will prove quite useful in analyses of electronic games as a heavily immersive, experiential medium of storytelling, as well as with imaginations of the “North” more broadly.<sup>57</sup>

Discussing why aesthetic illusion exists and tackling the larger question of why humans are willing to be immersed in illusory experiences, Wolf cites our thirst for information, a part of our survival strategy, as an important factor that leads us to be curious about the minds, emotions, and lives of other humans as well as unfamiliar matters of reality.<sup>58</sup> Further, he discusses humans’ intrinsic empathy, and our episodic and semantic memories which can be easily recalled later on, particularly if tied with strong emotions.<sup>59</sup> These features give us both a natural tendency to imagine the motives and thoughts behind other humans’ actions, and an ability to take up other, non-native perspectives; these innate traits of human social existence combine with “our ability, and indeed (occasional) desire to mentally dissociate ourselves from the here and now and imagine ourselves to be elsewhere, to exist in another time or to be someone else.”<sup>60</sup> These features both enable and predispose us “to immerse ourselves in others’ and our own (past) experiences, be they actual, represented or merely imagined, and all of this predisposes us to experiencing aesthetic illusions.”<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>57</sup> While games are here the object of my study, the collection of essays that Wolf’s introduction precedes deals with a variety of media in which aesthetic illusion is deployed, including literature, theatre, lyric poetry, painting, photography, film, games, and even instrumental music. I remark on this to dissuade anyone from the notion that electronic games are the only medium in which aesthetic illusion arises, and rather it is merely one of many other media, albeit a particularly immersive one, in which storyworlds behind artistic works invite the viewer to experience it in a more subjective fashion, beyond distant observation.

<sup>58</sup> Wolf, “Aesthetic Illusions,” 28.

<sup>59</sup> Wolf, “Aesthetic Illusion,” 28.

<sup>60</sup> Wolf, “Aesthetic Illusion,” 29. This passage is followed by a reference to Victor Nell (1988) claiming that such consciousness change is eagerly sought after by people, and likening illusionist immersion to the effects of alcohol and mystical experiences.

<sup>61</sup> Wolf, “Aesthetic Illusion,” 29.

However, Wolf concedes that the individual factors influencing one's reception of illusionist works are nigh-impossible to account for without limiting the study severely, and that the illusion-creating artifact remains the only determinable factor in the production of aesthetic illusion, and thus will be placed at the center of any study in this respect. He advises us to formulate a theoretically-constructed "average recipient," whose major features are simplified to a willingness and ability to suspend disbelief and immerse themselves into the illusionist representation.<sup>62</sup> When discussing electronic games, this "average recipient" will be the typical gamer, anyone from the generations which have grown up with video games as a part of their life, seeking out new games to experience as they are created and willingly immersing themselves into the vivid representational worlds they offer.

### **Relics, Irruption, and Embedding: Objects which evoke the "North" in Fiction and Reality**

The use of the past, and of the Scandinavian past in particular, is decidedly not limited to the modern age of storytelling. There is research into this phenomenon as it is evidenced in prior cultures, including the medieval Icelandic literary culture which produced and preserved the vast majority of what remains from the region's past. One interest of this field of study has to do with the curious ways in which Icelanders grappled with the theological and moral issues of their pre-Christian heritage, the cherished narrative material surrounding their pagan forebears' lives and deeds, which was arranged and preserved textually by successive generations of scribes beginning in the first decades of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Merrill Kaplan's exploration of these literary loopholes as demonstrated in four stories from *Flateyjarbók* is of particular use to this thesis. At four points within the codex's collection of texts, an old wandering figure, bearing stories of the *fornöld* (the age of heroes and monsters, akin to the English phrase 'Days of Yore') appears at the respective courts of the Norwegian kings Óláfr Tryggvason and Óláfr Haraldsson (Óláfr helgi), who were not only Christian but famously credited with the Christianization of Norway and Iceland. In order to dissect these episodes and the medieval literary strategies they demonstrate for dealing with issues related to preserving and reusing the old story material about pre-Christian subjects, Kaplan deploys three categorical and theoretical tools.

---

<sup>62</sup> Wolf, "Aesthetic Illusion," 31.

The first concept is *irruption*, a type of temporal disruption that denotes the uninvited and unexpected intrusion of the past into the present, causing disturbances.<sup>63</sup> This is very literally represented in the episodes from *Flateyjarbók* by the unbidden arrival of the wandering stranger at the king's doorstep, who himself is an embodiment of the past he tells tales about. "Irruption describes the (apparent) movement of the past towards us but not our approach to the past or the approach of any people to the past relative to their own present," the latter of course underlying any willful engagement with the goods of the past.<sup>64</sup> Irruption does not only manifest by means of its anthropomorphization, as it does in the form of the uninvited guest, but can arise by means of a certain type of object inserted into the narrative which has a similar effect of confronting characters and audiences with the unbidden past. This kind of object falls under the second conceptual category Kaplan uses, the *relic*.

The *relic*, whose definition is imported from folkloristics, is an object which belongs to some former time in which it served a regular function. It gains the status of 'relic' when its original function is lost and it becomes an object of contemplation of that past era, serving as a gateway or, at the very least, a window; it is an object out of time, surviving in the present but belonging more to its own original time, whose utility is no longer necessary or viable.<sup>65</sup> Drawing on a four-point definition of relic from Konrad Köstlin, the final point is crucial here to how the relic functions in both real life and narrative: that the relic "can be used to reconstruct that past [the "vanished age" from which it originates]," but Kaplan expands on this point to add access to that past more broadly, in addition to reconstruction.<sup>66</sup> Further, the relic is apprehended to be temporally irruptive, as a piece of the past stumbled upon or breaking through into the present, as well as the fact that the status of relic is a constructed one, reflecting and belonging to the present which ponders and uses it.<sup>67</sup> Kaplan discusses relics with respect to intellectual goods pertaining to lore about the Æsir, especially about Óðinn and the time when men venerated him, as having been seen as relics by 14<sup>th</sup> century Christian Icelanders. Assigning such material the status of 'relic' creates distance between the past represented and the present apprehending it to be so, and is thus an act of categorization.<sup>68</sup> The narrative temporality of the episodes from *Flateyjarbók* is quite complex, dealing with multiple pasts in an authorial present, which is to us itself another past.

---

<sup>63</sup> Merrill Kaplan, *Thou Fearful Guest: Addressing the past in four tales in Flateyjarbók* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2011), 16-17.

<sup>64</sup> Kaplan, *Thou Fearful Guest*, 17.

<sup>65</sup> Kaplan, *Thou Fearful Guest*, 22.

<sup>66</sup> Kaplan, *Thou Fearful Guest*, 22.

<sup>67</sup> Kaplan, *Thou Fearful Guest*, 22.

<sup>68</sup> Kaplan, *Thou Fearful Guest*, 23.



This complexity arises through the interplay of the irruption of characters (the wanderer) and relics (the stories he brings) and the process of narrative embedding, the third tool Kaplan discusses.

*Embedding* acts in a perpendicular manner to irruption, though not necessarily in opposition to it. Where irruption emphasizes the difference and distance between two (or more, narratively speaking) times, embedding “exploits the very heaped-up-ness which is the point of tension and interest in the first place.”<sup>69</sup> Embedding creates levels within the narrative, often through dialogue in the case of medieval Icelandic literature, in which various ‘pasts’ can be stacked one atop the other without creating issues with narrative meaning and even remedying some of the anxiety associated with confronting the past brought about through irruptivity. Kaplan explains how “the Old Norse literary corpus is remarkably past-oriented. However, there are several different pasts in play: the immediate Christian past, the late pagan period leading up to conversion, the more distant, legendary *fornöld*.”<sup>70</sup> The presence of irruption, relics, and embedding strategies are very much still in use in narratives of the modern day, and indeed are quite common in the game-based medium of storytelling, but the nature of approaching the past has changed dramatically since the Christian Middle Ages. Namely, rather than having to rationalize and categorize the problematic pagan past as Christians transmitting cultural material, people today are inversely disappointed with the present state of affairs, and Christianity (organized religion in general, but Christianity in particular in the West) has come to be viewed in more neutral if not decidedly-negative terms by the bulk of Western society. Thus, the pagan past and its stories of heroism and great deeds, moral rectitude, magics, bravery, etc. become an idealized store of cultural goods that have been in resurgence in popular culture of late. Essentially, the concept of ‘relic’ remains, but its quality is different for the society of today, wherein it contains the evidence of something older and more pristine, for whatever ends the observer may have in store for it. These relics can be both celebrated and resurrected culturally, artistically, and for purposes of play and storytelling, but also for more sinister ends.

---

<sup>69</sup> Kaplan, *Thou Fearful Guest*, 51. This aspect of embedding shares the “heaped-up-ness” of time with another feature of heterotopia defined by Foucault: the heterotopia of time, which seeks to collect different times and store them in one space (of which the museum is the prime example).

<sup>70</sup> Kaplan, *Thou Fearful Guest*, 19.

## Memory and Reception: an Overview of their Basic Principles and Application to a Theory of the Constructed “North”

The last pieces of the necessary framework are also in many ways the most important, dealing with the continual use and re-use of cultural material throughout time. The field of memory studies offers some principles and assumptions about the function and form of memory in a society (and more broadly as an important cognitive and psychological tool common to all humanity) that are invaluable to the aims of this thesis. The related field of reception studies, in which category this thesis also principally falls, draws upon these tenets of memory studies in its day-to-day activities of pursuing the understanding of such material by audiences, both medieval and modern. As pointed out by Kaplan, Old Norse literature was very concerned with the past, and made conscious choices in its construction and categorization. Other scholars, such as Torfi Tulinius and Pernille Hermann, have also studied this phenomenon, expounding on the memory concepts formulated by Jan and Aleida Assmann, among others.

In their conception, *cultural memory* is described in opposition to *communicative memory*; the latter is characterized by “its proximity to the everyday,” and the former is defined by its distance from the present.<sup>71</sup> While communicative memory is tied integrally to the social dimensions of the period and the recent past, formed in communication with others’ memories and related to the various groups to which individuals belong, cultural memory is tied to “fateful events of the past” that become fixed points.<sup>72</sup> The memories of these fixed points are “maintained through cultural formations (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance),” known as “figures of memory.”<sup>73</sup> The interplay between communicative and cultural memories (and daily communication broadly) is important to consider, and is described thusly:

In the flow of everyday communications such festivals, rites, epics, poems, images, etc., form “islands of time,” islands of a completely different temporality suspended from time. In cultural memory, such islands of time expand into memory spaces of “retrospective contemplativeness” ... In cultural formation, a collective experience crystallizes, whose meaning, when touched upon, may suddenly become accessible again across millennia.<sup>74</sup>

---

<sup>71</sup> Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” *New German Critique* 65 (1995), 129.

<sup>72</sup> Assmann and Czaplicka, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” 127, 129.

<sup>73</sup> Assmann and Czaplicka, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” 129.

<sup>74</sup> Assmann and Czaplicka, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” 129.

Cultural memory serves as a storehouse of reusable material, akin to the idea of repertoire outlined by Even-Zohar, that a society draws upon to create cultural products and to continually define and reshape its own self-image.<sup>75</sup> Further, this material is always based on *reconstruction*, because no memory can simply preserve the past. This necessarily indicates an orientation of the past towards the apprehensions and concerns of the present society that maintains these memories. “True, it is fixed in immovable figures of memory and stores of knowledge, but every contemporary context relates to these differently, sometimes by appropriation, sometimes by criticism, sometimes by preservation or transformation.”<sup>76</sup> Thus, Assmann has formulated the major trends in attitudes towards the Old Norse cultural material discussed in this thesis: those of appropriation, as by national socialism and contemporary white nationalism; of criticism, as in the post-war discrediting of Germanic romanticism and national ethnicism; of preservation, particularly in the endeavors of scholars always seeking a clearer understanding of the past; and, especially, of transformation, demonstrated by the works of previous figures like Wagner and Tolkien, and continuing in the popular culture of today.

Important work has been done in memory studies of medieval Icelandic literary culture, particularly focusing on aspects of cultural memory that relate to the use of the past. In *The Matter of the North*, Torfi Tulinius illustrates the emergence of the genre of literary fiction in 13<sup>th</sup> century Iceland as the result of processes of remembering and reflecting on the past in order to define the present identity of society. His claim that literature “cannot help reflecting the ideology of the society in which it is produced,” and further that literature is one of the “privileged vehicles for ideology, for literature must express a certain worldview,” has important implications for any study of a society’s use of the past.<sup>77</sup> Investigating the same phenomena, Pernille Hermann describes the construction and deployment of the past with respect to literacy’s effect on Icelandic memorial practices, and how texts “reveal social, political, and ideological aspects of their present...[and] are indebted to the interests of people in the following centuries, when sagas were rewritten and transmitted in manuscripts.”<sup>78</sup> Both she and Jesse Byock have noted how “memories result from a dynamic interplay between past and present and are continually reconstructed and cultivated according

---

<sup>75</sup> Assmann and Czaplicka, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” 132. Self-reflexivity and awareness of self-image are integral functions of cultural memory according to Assmann.

<sup>76</sup> Assmann and Czaplicka, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” 130.

<sup>77</sup> Torfi H. Tulinius, *The Matter of the North: The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth-Century Iceland*, transl. Randi C. Eldevik (Odense: Odense University Press, 2002), 40-41.

<sup>78</sup> Pernille Hermann, “Literacy,” in *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, eds. Ármann Jakobsson and Sverrir Jakobsson (London, New York: Routledge, 2017), 41.

to the needs of the present,”<sup>79</sup> and that this process “allows history to be shaped in the image and interest of a community’s needs” [the latter employing *social memory*, a term with very similar meaning to cultural and communicative memories].<sup>80</sup>

Hence, these scholars confirm a process of *retextualization*, wherein societies look to the past for important cultural material and memories of events to produce new works and to define their identity with respect to that past. This forms a continuum, where new cultural constellations that are informed by memories and prior material also shape and reshape the very same memories going forward. This process is ongoing into the present, when retextualization has moved from literature to new media that creatively reinterpret the stories and memories of the past to suit the needs and desires of today. Video games represent merely one (albeit significant and underexplored in this respect) node in the cultural constellation or repertoire of memories of the medieval North, which then contribute to the shaping of those very same memories and collective public perceptions, to that which I am calling the “North.” The continuation of the process is evidenced in works of modern reception of Old Norse culture, where the research of Jón Karl Helgason and Carolyne Larrington principally springs to mind.

Jón Karl recently published a survey of modern receptions and adaptations of the Old Norse corpus, in which he addresses comic books, plays, music, films, and a few other sites of popular Nordicism, with a treatment that is both quite broad and deep. In this book, his approach acknowledges the continuing cycle of reception and transformation of cultural material noted above, stating how “adaptations become pre-texts of further adaptations...”<sup>81</sup> while also discouraging readers from judging the value of adaptations based on their fidelity to the source texts (which, he continues, are themselves adaptations).<sup>82</sup> His overall treatment is quite erudite, addressing the constant flux of the story material throughout its history: “Hence, I approach the eddas and sagas as a flourishing cultural tradition: an accumulation of texts, images, sounds and ideas that reverberate through the fabric of various cultures at various times.”<sup>83</sup> This accumulation he describes is akin to the systemic repertoire of the “North.” In a more singular study, Carolyne Larrington deals exclusively with the wildly

---

<sup>79</sup> Pernille Hermann, “Concepts of Memory and Approaches to the Past in Medieval Icelandic Literature,” *Scandinavian Studies* 81, no. 3 (2009): 228.

<sup>80</sup> Jesse Byock, “Social Memory and the Sagas: The Case of *Egils Saga*,” *Scandinavian Studies* 76, no. 3 (2004): 300.

<sup>81</sup> Jón Karl Helgason, *Echoes of Valhalla: The Afterlife of the Eddas and Sagas*, transl. Jane Victoria Appleton (London: Reaktion Books, 2017), 196.

<sup>82</sup> Jón Karl Helgason, *Echoes of Valhalla*, 11.

<sup>83</sup> Jón Karl Helgason, *Echoes of Valhalla*, 11.

popular franchise *Game of Thrones*, both the books (*A Song of Ice and Fire*) and the HBO television series. Her concern is with the medieval roots of the series and how the richness of its created world mimics the complexity of historical medieval society, outlining the author George R. R. Martin's fascination with history and the cultures of the past. Her approach reveals how "the facts of history are transmuted into something richer, stranger, more archetypal," and that "just as what seems historical and real is in dialogue with the traditional and folkloric, the series' supernatural speaks equally to real-world concerns."<sup>84</sup> Larrington thus reveals how the combination of the myth and magic of medieval fantasy with a more nuanced and detailed social, political, and economic setting (mirroring not only the complex realities of both medieval and modern societies, but also pertinent issues and apprehensions) makes for an internationally-acclaimed epic title.

As one may see, the toolbox assembled in the above pages is weighty and varied, a necessary measure in the hopes of treating the object of study with due diligence and opening up opportunities for future investigations in this vein. I have theorized this "North" as a conglomerate of socially- and culturally-constructed memories, both 'real' and imagined, which overlays and supersedes the historic and geographic reality of northern Europe in which it "takes place." Products inspired by this heterotopic polysystem of storyworlds feed back into the cycle of imagination and memory construction, thus producing new memories of the "North" for successive iterations of cultural products through a process of retextualization. As some of the scholars above have described, different societies at different times relate to the past in different ways which are tied to their own apprehensions and worldviews. By studying this "North" in the popular new medium of video games, a window may be opened into the relationship to this cultural past shared by an international demographic of gamers, and how this in turn will affect other media and successive products. By considering it systemically, I will also seek to demonstrate the movement of the "North" towards a central position in the polysystem of popular culture in recent years, transferring from more peripheral areas after the severe dampening of enthusiasm for Old Norse myth, post-World Wars, noted by Heather O'Donoghue.<sup>85</sup> Considering it within the purview of Foucault's heterotopia, as a social and cultural mirror of the reflected group, and the present-

---

<sup>84</sup> Carolyne Larrington, *Winter is Coming: The Medieval World of Game of Thrones* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 2-4.

<sup>85</sup> Heather O'Donoghue, *From Asgard to Valhalla: The Remarkable History of the Norse Myths* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 164. She also describes the continuation of popular association with Norse myth through its survival and reorientation in Tolkien's work, by which readers are given access to "an (in this case immense) body of arcane lore [medieval Norse literature]" (188).

oriented-past of memory and reception studies, this treatment may also give insight into the reasons behind its newfound popularity, especially considered against the backdrop of the return of romanticism and the rise of nationalism.

## CHAPTER II

### PLAYING THE “NORTH”: GAMES IN THE INSPIRATION/CONSTRUCTION CONTINUUM

#### Introduction

In order to test the framework and to illustrate how this mental construct of the “North” is affected by the widespread new medium of electronic games, I will highlight a number of highly popular and successful titles. These games vary in content, style, country of origin, time of release, and use of the medieval material or deployment of medievalisms, yet they all belong to the genre of medieval fantasy role-playing games (RPGs). While a number of elements from each game will be selected and explored with respect to the theoretical framework that has been assembled above, the analysis will revolve to an extent around the main hero of each story (the player-controlled character, or the “role” he or she takes up in the phrase “RPG”). This is not only because the hero of the story is the lens through which players experience the created storyworlds of games, but more broadly because the hero character is the focus, and in many cases the driving force, of many narratives, literary or not, throughout time (including in the sagas, which make up the bulk of medieval northern literature).

As video games are built to provide many hours of entertainment and to encourage more than one play-through (as in the case of narratives where the player’s actions may result in different endings, a common mechanic in this genre), the analysis will necessarily be on broader themes and archetypes present in the games’ storyworlds or narratives that are related to northern tropes; however, in some cases individual scenes or character aspects will be focused upon that reveal such connections to medieval northern cultural heritage. In addition to the main games explored, I will also mention some other titles in passing which illustrate the same trends in the intensified popularity of Viking stories in entertainment media of late.

The first two games discussed illustrate the character of medieval RPGs *before* the “northern turn” that I am arguing has taken place, resembling more general European fantasy and owing much to Tolkien; the second pair of games will show the movement of the “North” toward a central position in the RPG fantasy system, as well as in broader popular culture. By juxtaposing these two sets of examples, the changes and movements between polysystemic repertoires in vogue will hopefully be made clear.

### **Fable: A Prototypical English Take on the Medieval Fantasy RPG**

The first *Fable* game was released in 2004 by the English Lionhead Studios to widespread acclaim. The game is set in a novel vision of legendary England, called Albion, in a time of monsters, magic, and heroes (not unlike the *fornöld* of Icelandic literary culture). The player takes their first steps into Albion in the role of a child living in the idyllic rural town of Oakvale, until it is raided by bandits. The bandits burn the village to the ground and slaughter everyone, including the protagonists' family, while only the protagonist is saved by the timely arrival of a hero belonging to the Heroes' Guild, who takes the player/character with him to the Guild to begin training in the ways of heroes. Heroes use their powers (particularly the all-important Will, a form of magic) to protect Albion's citizens and preserve peace and justice, but some use their powers for evil. The protagonist is a promising young hero, yearning to avenge his family.

After their education at the Guild, the player/character is given general freedom to roam Albion, either following the main storyline of the game, or pursuing "side-quests" (nonessential missions done at the player's choice), exploring, interacting with citizens, and a host of other activities. As the player pursues the storyline, they will discover a much greater evil than simple banditry at work behind the scenes in Albion, and it is up to them alone to gather enough power to challenge the arch-villain, Jack of Blades, who led the bandits in the Oakvale raid, killed their father, and, as it turns out, kidnapped their mother (a retired hero named Scarlet Robe) and blinded their sister Theresa. Jack is an ancient being of dark magical power who was defeated millennia ago by the first hero, William Black, from whom all heroes are descended, using the Sword of Aeons. Theresa, whose heroic power manifests as prophetic visions, uncovers that the raid on Oakvale was part of Jack's ambition to gain the Sword of Aeons for himself, claiming its power with the blood of the player/character's family as descendants of William Black.

What makes *Fable* and its sequel (to be mentioned below) a good starting place is that their storyworld, the world of Albion, demonstrates the embedding of medieval Scandinavian cultural elements and literary motifs in a more general medieval fantasy world, prior to the Viking bonanza of recent years. On the surface, the world of *Fable* is thoroughly English, with its characteristic British humor and wit, quirky and memorable characters, and fairytale setting which, in combination with its groundbreaking gameplay, are why it is so well-received and memorable among players. In many ways, Albion looks like the idealized England that Tolkien yearned for in the post-industrial and post-war era, with great, deep



forests filled with magic and creatures both wondrous and terrible, stretching between quaint human settlements, when heroes walked the land.

As noted previously, before Tolkien, Victorian England was host to a period of Viking fascination, and even before that, in the Anglo-Saxon period the interactions and settlements of Scandinavians in the British Isles resulted in the transferal of cultural and literary material that was both “almost inevitable” and left a legacy of somewhat “elusive” effects on later medieval English literature that is hard to pin down.<sup>86</sup> Coupled with Tolkien’s profound influence on medieval fantasy going forward, *Fable* appears as nothing more than whimsical English game about a fantastic, mythic-historical Britain, but is suffused with medieval Scandinavian tropes if one knows where to look.

The first and most obvious is the magical sword, the Sword of Aeons, which is at the center of the original struggle between William Black and Jack of Blades long ago as well as of the events of *Fable*. *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* deploy the theme of magical, named swords, alongside their most famous magical item, the cursed One Ring, and as a result these motifs are widespread in medieval high-fantasy.<sup>87</sup> These tropes were drawn by Tolkien from Old Norse sources, especially *Völsungasaga*, the plot of which revolves around the magic ring taken by Loki from the dwarf Andvari, who laid a curse upon it (and the rest of his treasure) to destroy any who possessed it<sup>88</sup> (like the One Ring, full of Sauron’s dark power and corrupting influence); and the sword Gramr, given to Sigmundr by Óðinn in disguise and later broken in battle by the same god, and reforged for Sigurðr by the smith Reginn to slay the dragon Fáfnir (mirrored by Tolkien as the broken sword Narsil, reforged for Aragorn and renamed Andúril).<sup>89</sup> In addition, *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* features a remarkable named sword, but this one bears a terrible curse: the sword Tyrfing, cursed to be the death of anyone wounded by it and to have to kill someone each time it was drawn.<sup>90</sup> William Black, when he steals the Sword of Aeons from Jack of Blades, had to trade his soul

---

<sup>86</sup> Heather O’Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Short Introduction* (Malden, Oxford, Victoria: Blackwell, 2004), 144.

<sup>87</sup> Credit is of course also due to the native British Arthurian legends and the sword Excalibur in the medieval fantasy trope of magical swords. However, there is no room in this thesis for a discussion on an entire other literary tradition.

<sup>88</sup> *Völsungasaga: The Saga of the Volsungs*, ed. & transl. R.G. Finch (London: Nelson, 1965), 26. This edition will be used for all future citations of *Völsungasaga*. Page numbers refer to the Old Norse and not to the English companion text.

<sup>89</sup> *Völsungasaga*, 4-5 (Óðinn plunges the sword into Barnstokkr and Sigmundr draws it out); 20 (Óðinn meets Sigmundr in his battle against Lyngvi and breaks Gramr); 27 (Gramr is reforged for Sigurðr by Reginn); 30-31 (Sigurðr slays Fáfnir).

<sup>90</sup> *Hervarar Saga ok Heiðreks*, ed. Gabriel Turville-Petre (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1956), 1.

in order to gain magical ownership over it and the power to defeat Jack; and later, in the events of *Fable*, the sword requires a blood sacrifice to trade ownership (Jack slays Scarlet Robe, but after the player/character defeats him and takes the sword, it is their choice to either destroy the sword or claim ownership of it by sacrificing Theresa in cold blood).

In the game's sequel, *Fable II*, a dastardly, greedy hero by the name of Reaver requires the player/character to perform a task for him in order to gain his help in defeating that game's villain, Lord Lucien, in a similar quest for vengeance after he murdered the protagonist's sister. The task is to bring Reaver's "Dark Seal" to an ominous place called the Shadow Court, deep in the marshes that have grown up around the former site of Oakvale in the 500 years between the two games. Upon arrival in the final chamber of the eerie Shadow Court, where some poor unfortunate young woman has ended up as the result of a clichéd toying with some nondescript magic book, the true nature of the mission becomes clear as three shadowed figures manifest before the player/character: Reaver has been sending sacrifices to the Shadow Court bearing his Dark Seal for hundreds of years as part of bargain with the Court, trading the victims' youth and life force for his own eternal youth. The player/character can either take the burden upon themselves or force the terrified woman to hold the seal as the transaction takes place, but the symbolism is clear here. A dark, ring-shaped seal that grants longevity beyond the norm seems quite like a twist on the cursed, magical ring from Tolkien's work (which granted Gollum and Bilbo unnatural longevity) and from its source in the saga.

There are many Germanic/Scandinavian medieval literary elements in the *Fable* universe that are less common to medieval fantasy than the magic sword and cursed ring tropes, but there is only room for a few to be mentioned here. In *Fable: The Lost Chapters* (an expansion version of the first game, with extra content and storylines), a year after the events of the main quest ending in the hero defeating Jack of Blades, a call for help comes from an isolated land far to the north from an ancient hero known only as Scythe (who may be William Black, cursed with eternal soulless life). The protagonist is called upon to travel to this place, an arctic island region known as the Northern Wastes, by retrieving a magical artifact called the Fire Heart. The Heart summons the Ship of the Drowned, on which they travel in unnatural silence to the Northern Wastes. The ship is "from the depths of time, sunken for millennia, with a crew of whispers."<sup>91</sup> The evil brewing in this land turns out to be Jack of Blades, reborn once again, and this time in the form of a great dragon. On maps given

---

<sup>91</sup> Dialogue from the Snowspire Oracle in *Fable: The Lost Chapters* (2005; Guildford: Lionhead Studios), electronic game.

in loading screens designating travel between regions, the Northern Wastes is positioned north of part of Albion, and it is hard to ignore the alignment between Albion (British Isles) with an arctic island (Iceland, perhaps?) to the north of it.

In more literary terms, the Ship of the Drowned could be an adaptation of Naglfar (“*nail-farer*”), the ship of the dead mentioned in the *Poetic Edda* and *Prose Edda*, that ferries Hrymr, Loki, and the people of Múspellsheimr to do battle with the forces of the Æsir at Ragnarök.<sup>92</sup> Rather than ferry from the north (or the east, as the poem has it, generally attributed as the direction of Jótunheimr), the Ship of the Drowned takes the protagonist *to* the north. As for Jack of Blades returning as a dragon, those with knowledge of the sagas will undoubtedly be drawn to recall Fáfnir, the famous dragon slain by Sigurðr in *Völsungasaga*, who was the son of the sorcerer Hreiðmarr. When Loki sees Hreiðmarr’s brother, Otr, in the shape of an otter, he kills and skins him, to the outrage of Hreiðmarr and his other sons, who bind the Æsir and force them to repay the killing with a large sum of gold. Óðinn and Hœnir, in typical fashion, make Loki go and get the required payment to get them out of this mess, and he extorts the gold from Andvari. Andvari’s curse proves effective soon after, and Fáfnir murders his own father for the gold and drives away Reginn, transforming into a serpent and greedily guarding the cursed treasure.<sup>93</sup> The similarity of two, formerly human figures, Fáfnir and Jack of Blades, both gifted with magic and malignant intentions, transforming into fearsome dragons that then must be slain by a hero figure, seems beyond coincidence.<sup>94</sup> These examples show evidence of some Old Norse literary tropes and figures that have been transformed and adapted within a unique RPG storyworld like *Fable*, one of the core design principles in the creation of which was to “create an epic world that was more like our own than a high-fantasy world...that means no elves, no dwarves [but rather with] monsters of the

---

<sup>92</sup> *Völuspá* (Konungsbók), *Eddukvæði I, Íslensk Fornrit*, eds. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason (Reykjavik: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2014), 303-304 (stanza 49-50); Snorri Sturluson, *Gylfaginning*, ed. Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1982/2005), 50.

<sup>93</sup> *Völsungasaga*, 24-26.

<sup>94</sup> Reading through the developer diaries of the Lionhead team who hatched *Fable*, as well as interviews with the head game designer and producer of Lionhead Studios, Peter Molyneux, yields no indication that they read or were familiar with the medieval literary source material. Although they were clearly creating a medieval-influenced world, their inspirations with *Fable*, at least according to Molyneux, came from movies such as *Sleepy Hollow* (1999), *King Arthur* (2004), and even older films like *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1945, influencing *Fable*’s unique ‘morality alignment’ system that was determined by how the player chose to conduct themselves in Albion and in interactions with non-player characters). Cf. Maurice Tan, “The movies that inspired the Fable series,” *Destructoid*, December 6, 2010. <https://www.destructoid.com/the-movies-that-inspired-the-fable-series-185106.phtml>.

kinds we use in children stories...”<sup>95</sup> However, debts to the medieval Icelandic literature extend beyond disparate and individual elements.

The last feature of *Fable* that will be mentioned is the narrative structure itself, and the core facet which drives the plot. While I mentioned before that the plot of *Fable* revolves around the Sword of Aeons in a similar way to Gramr in *Völsungasaga*, the driving force of the events that take place in the storyworld, both on screen and in the lore of Albion, is really the conflict between William Black and Jack of Blades and their respective families. Long ago, thousands of years before the events of *Fable*, before the advent of heroes, Albion was ruled not only by Jack, but by a mysterious and powerful Court of Blades, comprised of the Queen, Knight, and Jack, who came from another plane known only as the Void. After many years of their cruel reign, William was born with the power of Will, the magical force innate to heroes mentioned previously, and he eventually stole Jack’s sword, the Sword of Aeons, and used it to defeat the Court of Blades and free Albion. While the Queen and Knight of Blades were destroyed outright, Jack’s soul escaped back to the Void to plot vengeance. As all heroes, including the player/character and his mother and sister, are descendants of William Black, what the story of *Fable* and the fate of Albion represents is actually a blood feud spanning millennia, carried out by supernatural and long-lived entities. The feud is a social structure well-attested in the Icelandic sagas, and in many ways they are some of the most famous literary examples of this type of conflict. The phenomenon of feud in honor-based societies like medieval Iceland has been studied in depth, such as in a comprehensive monograph by William Ian Miller, yet such honor and social dimensions are not carried over into the *Fable* universe. Rather, the feud here is based on blood vengeance and emotional impetus created by the pseudo-mythological conflict between William Black and the tyrannical Court of Blades.

While the feud in *Fable* has left behind the extraordinarily intricate social dimensions and subtleties of medieval Icelandic feud, honor and exchange, it remains in accordance with the majority of conventions that separate feud from simple acts of vengeance or from war as outlined by Miller:

1. Feud is a relationship (hostile) between two groups.
2. Unlike ad hoc revenge killing that can be an individual matter, feuding involves groups that can be recruited by any number of principles, among which kinship, vicinage, household, or clientage are most usual.
3. Unlike war, feud does not involve relatively large mobilizations, but only occasional musterings for limited purposes...
4. Feud involves collective liability.

---

<sup>95</sup> Maurice Tan, “The movies that inspired the Fable series.” This comment was likely in relation to purely fantastical worlds like that of Middle Earth, which bears no resemblance to the real world (at least on the surface).

The target need not be the actual wrongdoer, nor, for that matter, need the vengeance-taker be the person most wronged. 5. A notion of exchange governs the process, a kind of my-turn/your-turn rhythm...<sup>96</sup>

In *Fable*, while William Black is just one man, his conflict is with the Court of Blades, a group of beings, and in turn their surviving member, Jack of Blades, seeks vengeance not against William himself (who falls from mention after a certain point, long before the game's events) but against his descendents, the line of heroes that leads to the protagonist and their family; thus the first two conditions of Miller's definition are met, with kinship being the determining factor of the second. For point three, the actual killings of revenge are between individuals and no armies to speak of are raised, outside of the group of bandits sent to destroy Oakvale by Jack (certainly no army). The fourth point is also met, as was mentioned, with Jack seeking vengeance against the descendents of William rather than the man himself; and vice versa, William's initiation of the 'feud' against the Court was not brought about because he was the "person most wronged," and rather he merely had the power to stand against them but was never mentioned to have been a specific target of their cruelty.

*Fable's* storyworld is, on the surface, quite far from contemporary notions of Scandinavian medieval fantasy, and has rather all the charm of quaint English fairytales, but is nonetheless suffused with medieval Germanic story elements. As an English game set in a mythical Britain, it occupies perhaps a unique place as part of the lineage of influence from Tolkien's transformative works, but also as a product of the cultural exchanges between Scandinavians, Anglo-Saxons and Normans stretching back into the Middle Ages.

### **Dark Souls: An Eastern View of European Medieval Fantasy**

FromSoftware's *Dark Souls*, which gained the company international recognition in 2011, will be the next topic of discussion. As mentioned at the outset of this thesis, this title is unique among those selected as it is a Japanese game, permitting a view of Japan's attraction to and interpretation of European medieval fantasy. *Dark Souls* and its sequels have become international hits in the gaming world and have made a name for themselves as some of the most difficult and daunting games of the RPG genre. In addition to their acclaimed gameplay and challenge, the world of *Dark Souls* is very open to multiple interpretations, speculation, and investigation by players, leading to numerous forums, websites, wikis, and YouTube

---

<sup>96</sup> William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), 180-181. Principles 6-9 do not apply as they refer to the social and political specificities of saga-age Iceland and not to feuding in general.

channels devoted solely to piecing together and theorizing the deep, hidden lore of the franchise. Overall, the game's atmosphere and storyworld lend themselves to creating rich, meaningful yet mysterious, and enticing experiences, giving players the opportunity to walk in the footsteps of the gods of this world and witness a vivid mythology come to life.

The action of the story takes place entirely in the smoldering ashes of the world of Lordran, decayed and desolate, and the player is dropped into this world to try and pick up the pieces and discover what happened. The player takes up the role of the 'Chosen Undead,' a figure prophesied to challenge the status quo of the gods and lead his fellow undead (a cursed race of mortals) away from squalor and destitution, to build a new world.<sup>97</sup> While combat is praised for its complexity, the gameplay is much the same as other RPGs: explore, collect weapons and armor, gain an experience currency which you spend to level up or buy things from merchants, fight epic bosses (major enemies), and pursue storylines. One of the features which makes *Dark Souls* rather brilliant and beloved by fans is the veracity and interconnectedness of the storyworld, in which features like respawning after death and online multiplayer gameplay, taken for granted as mere mechanics in most games, are actually interwoven into the lore of the story and not left as unexplained functions.

For instance, respawning is not an arbitrary mechanic, but built into the curse levied upon the human race who are branded with the 'Darksign.' This strange, ring-shaped brand "signifies an accursed undead. Those branded with it are reborn after death, but one day will lose their mind and go hollow."<sup>98</sup> Like Andvari's golden ring from *Völsungasaga* mentioned before, here again emerges the trope of the cursed ring. "Hollowing" represents the complete loss of purpose and drive to continue on in the grim world of Lordran, when an undead gives up hope and loses their sanity, becoming one of the emaciated, mindless undead the player encounters in the game. Their twisted state and decayed minds remind one of the corrupting influence of Tolkien's One Ring upon Gollum, as well. Thereby, even the difficulty of the game and players' possible frustration and abandonment of it are supported by the story; the only way to 'lose' in *Dark Souls*, both in the game signified by the loss of will and hollowing, and outside in the real world of the player, is by giving up and refusing to

---

<sup>97</sup> Again, as with many RPGs, there are multiple paths to take and multiple endings to be achieved, encouraging replayability. However, many theorists of the story agree (and the games themselves seem to confirm this in the sequels) that the 'Dark' ending is the canon one, wherein the Chosen Undead lets the fire fade and ushers in the Age of Dark. This will be explained in the body text more thoroughly.

<sup>98</sup> *Dark Souls*, in-game item description of the "Darksign."

continue. There is certainly something reminiscent in this perseverance of the staunch-hearted severity of the saga age heroes of Iceland, which fascinated William Morris.<sup>99</sup>

Souls are the currency with which the player/character becomes stronger, starting very small and slowly gaining the power to defeat and claim immense, monstrous souls for themselves over the course of the game. A single human soul amounts to very little, but in tandem, grouped together and standing atop one another, souls can grant the power to change the world and topple the gods. In addition to killing enemies and bosses to gain souls, the player will also come across groupings of souls and other valuable items on corpses in various places. One theory<sup>100</sup> posits that these bodies are those of undead who rose to the call of the prophecy and set out before you, and these spots are where they finally gave up hope, died, and presumably went hollow, leaving behind experience, items, spells, keys, and other necessary items for the player/character to forge ahead where they could not. This raises interesting questions which may be reflected in Viking Age transferal of power regarding the dead and their living successors.

Alison Margaret Klevnäs has written about this topic, re-evaluating the archaeological and written evidence for mound-breaking and plundering of the dead in light of new discoveries of temporally and spatially consistent practices of burial disturbances. Mound-breaking is a common scene in the saga literature, often coupled with direct interactions with the dead, reanimated as *draugr*. While physical evidence for mound re-entry was previously considered rare, new discoveries and reconsiderations of old material have yielded a substantial archaeological basis for such practices across Scandinavia, including in Iceland, the setting for most of the mound-breaking scenes in literature.<sup>101</sup> Throughout Scandinavia, burial reopening and removal of grave goods, particularly swords and jewelry, has a history going back to the Roman Iron Age.<sup>102</sup> Literary episodes of such practices are often linked with retrieving certain artifacts as well, such as the previously-mentioned *Hervarar saga*, where the sword Tyrfing is retrieved from the barrow of Angantýr and his eleven brothers by his daughter Hervör.<sup>103</sup> The sword Gramr is another example from the sagas, not taken from a barrow but retrieved from the body of Sigmundr by his wife Hjördís, as he lay dying after the

---

<sup>99</sup> Ian Felce, *William Morris and the Icelandic Sagas* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2018), 22.

<sup>100</sup> Theory sourced from YouTube video, “Why is Dark Souls 1 A Masterpiece?!” by The Act Man (Published July 24, 2018). <https://youtu.be/LqhtBsxAZNo>. The late date of this video, considering the game’s release in 2011, shows just how devoted the fans are as well as how enrapturing and open-ended the story is.

<sup>101</sup> Alison Margaret Klevnäs, “Imbued with the Essence of the Owner’: Personhood and Possessions in the Reopening and Reworking of Viking-Age Burials,” *European Journal of Archaeology* 19, no. 3 (2016), 458.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*, 15-22 (Hervör retrieves the sword from the barrow by waking Angantýr from death in this famous scene, as verse embedded in the prose saga).

battle with King Lyngvi where Óðinn appeared and broke the sword.<sup>104</sup> These textual examples of artifact retrieval, here of swords, from the bodies or mounds of the deceased, thus reflect practices of mound-breaking in the transferal of power, authority, personal qualities, and other boons during the Viking Age, and even into the Middle Ages, which were more widespread than previously considered.<sup>105</sup>

In *Dark Souls*, this “mythical kinship [created by] the bequeathing of heirlooms”<sup>106</sup> is channeled in the importance of the objects and weaponry left behind on the bodies of these undead who came before the protagonist, creating a sort of lineage that is not limited by blood relation. As Klevnäs shows, the objects most commonly taken are those in close proximity to, or indeed worn upon, the bodies, particularly jewelry and weapons, and in *Dark Souls*, weapons and powerful rings, which grant sometimes crucial effects to the player/character necessary to progress, are typically found directly on these bodies. When these bodies contain consumables which, when used, grant quantities of souls to the player/character, they are named things such as “Soul of a Proud Knight,” or “Soul of a Great Hero,” to signify the lineage of those struggling in the prophecy which the protagonist has become a part of. This is also reflected in the reality of the Viking Age burial openings, as Klevnäs describes how the objects taken “carry with them something of each past owner, which...they bestow upon their new possessor.”<sup>107</sup> In *Dark Souls*, this “something” is their literal power, represented by the souls bequeathed or left behind and used to empower oneself or one’s equipment in order to get farther than the fallen heroes.<sup>108</sup>

As with *Fable*, broader narrative structures inherited from the Scandinavian past inhabit the storyworld of *Dark Souls*, this time lying closer to the mythological material. An opening cinematic sequence at the beginning of the game establishes the basic lore of *Dark Souls*: at first, the world was gray and unchanging, ruled by the Everlasting Dragons, until in the shadows below, the First Flame appeared. The flame brought disparity, and thus change, into existence, and four beings, the most powerful of the giant race, found four mighty Lord Souls within the First Flame: the Witch of Izalith gained the Life Soul, Nito the Death Soul,

---

<sup>104</sup> *Völsungasaga*, 19-21.

<sup>105</sup> Klevnäs, “‘Imbued with the Essence of the Owner’,” 463.

<sup>106</sup> Klevnäs, “‘Imbued with the Essence of the Owner’,” 469.

<sup>107</sup> Klevnäs, “‘Imbued with the Essence of the Owner’,” 467.

<sup>108</sup> The roles of the dead and past heroes in the protagonist’s journey through Lordran are even more directly revealed in some dialogue from an NPC (non-player character, part of the game), the jolly knight Solaire of Astora, which diegetically incorporates online cooperative possibilities of play as well as the summoning of other NPCs to help the player overcome certain bosses: “The flow of time itself is convoluted, with heroes centuries old phasing in and out.” Memory itself is incarnate in the world of *Dark Souls*, and the concept of old heroes’ strength still having an effect on the world and its course is also reminiscent of the *einherjar*.



Gwyn the Light Soul, and the fourth being, known only as the mysterious Furtive Pygmy, received the fragile Dark Soul. The first three beings used their Lord Souls to wage war on the Everlasting Dragons, defeating them and usurping mastery of the world to begin the Age of Fire, becoming the new gods and building a great kingdom. The Furtive Pygmy remained hidden in the dark, and became the progenitor of mankind, his Dark Soul splitting repeatedly and spreading throughout his descendants.<sup>109</sup> Over time, the First Flame began to fade, and despite all efforts to keep it burning and rekindle it, the Dark began to overtake the Fire. The player/character arises in this fading, dilapidated phase of Lordran, and, depending on which characters they choose to trust and follow, they strive to either defeat the most powerful beings (including the gods) and claim their powerful souls and relight the First Flame themselves, sacrificing their empowered body to keep the fire burning a little longer; or to defeat Gwyn once and for all and leave the First Flame to fade, ushering in the Age of Dark (aka the Age of Man). However, one caveat of the *Dark Souls* series is the built-in cyclicity of the world, as dialogue from one NPC in *Dark Souls 2* reveals: “Long ago, when this very land was called something else...we say Drangleic now, but...countless kingdoms have risen and fallen on this very spot, and this won’t be the last, oh no...”<sup>110</sup>

There are certainly some elements here which harken back to Norse mythology as it is given in the eddic prose and poetry, even while the game’s transformation of it is quite unique. To start, the First Flame, which brings with it disparity of light and dark and the mortal races, can be confidently related back to the primordial fire that comes from Múspellsheimr. In the enigmatic cosmogony related to King Gylfi in *Gylfaginning*, the heat from Múspellsheimr melts the frozen, poisonous rime that grew out of Niflheimr, and the resultant dripping formed the primordial being Ymir and the cow Auðhumla.<sup>111</sup> This event was the beginning of life in this famous iteration of Norse mythology, just as the ignition of the First Flame is the beginning of life in *Dark Souls*. Stemming from this parallel, in both myths the source of life and the world also plays a role in its apocalyptic ending. Surtr, foremost of the fire giants, fares forth from Múspellsheimr in the south to meet the Æsir in battle during the Ragnarøk, leading the *lýðir Múspells*.<sup>112</sup> In *Dark Souls*, the mythos takes

---

<sup>109</sup> YouTube video, “Dark Souls Story: Gwyn & the Dark [Part 2],” VaatiVidya (published February 14, 2013). <https://youtu.be/qopqgAtk0Q4>.

<sup>110</sup> *Dark Souls 2*, character dialogue from Laddersmith Gilligan.

<sup>111</sup> *Gylfaginning*, 9-11 (lines 20-22; 12-15; 6-8). ““Ok þá er mœttisk hrímin ok blær hitans svá at bráðnaði ok draup, ok af þeim kvikudropum kviknaði með krapti þess er til sendi hitann, ok varð manns líkandi, ok var sá nefndr Ymir...Næst var þat, þá er hrimit draup, at þar varð af kýr sú er Auðhumla hét, en fjórar mjólkár runnu ór spenum hennar, ok fœddi hon Ymi.””

<sup>112</sup> *Völuspá* (K), 303-304 (stanzas 49 & 51).

“twilight of the gods” quite literally, and the fading of the First Flame creates the conditions for the end of the reign of gods; simultaneously, the dual capacity of Múspell for creation/destruction is mirrored in that the First Flame also bequeaths the Dark Soul to the Furtive Pygmy, creating the preconditions for the Age of Fire to be replaced by the Age of Dark. Also in likeness between the two mythologies is that the first beings (aside from the timeless dragons of the gray proto-world in *Dark Souls*) of both are giants, Ymir from the dripping rime and the four giants, who would become gods, from the First Flame.

The similarities can be taken further. For instance, if one were to consider Ragnarök as a past event that ushers in the end of the pre-Christian gods and their world, the new world that springs from the sea in *Völuspá* and *Snorra Edda* could be believed to be our current world, the time of men. The *menn tveir* from *Gylfaginning* who survive Surtr’s fire and go on to repopulate the world with humans are thus like the human descendants of the Furtive Pygmy, ushering in the *veröld*, the age of men.<sup>113</sup> *Dark Souls* has taken this cycle of birth-destruction-rebirth of the world and turned it into the frame story for a trilogy of successive games, which each take place towards the end of one such cycle of existence, an undisclosed amount of time having passed since the previous game, “when this very land was called something else...”

These first two games are representative of medieval high fantasy in video games between 2004 and the end of 2011, as two highly-popular and successful games that each spawned a trilogy with devoted fans around the world. In particular, they demonstrate the place held by medieval Scandinavian cultural elements in medieval fantasy writ large at the time, before their more recent popularization and elevation into the limelight (rather than embedding and less direct adaptation), as pieces integrated into a larger storyworld of medievalism rather than as the subjects of their own titles. The next examples, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* and *Jotun*, will illustrate the inversion of this relationship between repertoires of medieval material, to where the “North” has become the center of attention (and not only in video games, as television and film trends also show).

### **Skyrim: The “Total Nordic” Experience**

*Skyrim* is the fifth installment of the *Elder Scrolls* series of games, developed by Maryland’s Bethesda Game Studio, which was already widely popular before the release of *Skyrim* in late 2011. The games each take place in one region of the world of Tamriel, a

---

<sup>113</sup> *Gylfaginning*, 54 (lines 10-12).

storyworld that plainly owes a great debt to Tolkien, with its sprawling sense of scale and depth, full of elves, magic, monsters, and different ‘races’ of men that call particular parts of Tamriel their home. The much-anticipated *Elder Scrolls V* takes place in Skyrim, the northernmost region of the continent and native land of the Nords (who were always a playable race, but now players would get to explore their homeland). The statement that *Skyrim* is both Bethesda’s greatest creation and also one of the best RPGs of all time would likely not be argued against for the most part, if sales and awards statistics are anything to go by.<sup>114</sup>

Like the two titles discussed above, the storyworld of Tamriel before the fifth installment of the series was characterized by a more general medieval flavor with threads and elements of medieval Scandinavian literature, as are inevitable with post-Tolkien medievalism, interwoven into the subtext. With *Skyrim*, this systemic relationship between the varying repertoires available to medieval fantasy was changed, and the Nordic material took the central position, and the rest of Tamriel’s storyworld became the odd man out. Players jumped at the opportunity to explore Skyrim, a fantastical and visually-stunning iteration of the “North,” from its snow-capped peaks to its ice-bitten tundras, reveling in the Viking-inspired culture and world of the Nords (the storyworld’s name for people from Skyrim, explicitly connecting them to ideas of the “North”).

Landscape makes up a significant part of *Skyrim*’s successful deployment of the “North” and its highly-immersive qualities that leave players awed at beautiful vistas and painting-like scenes of wintry nature. The power of the landscape was very much the intention of Bethesda’s art director, Matt Carafano, who also expressed a similar point to what I seek to demonstrate with the movements and transfers of the polysystems of medieval fantasy: “Oblivion [the previous title in the *Elder Scrolls* series] was more kind of standard European fantasy, and with *Skyrim*, we wanted to do something more. That same feel wouldn’t fit for this game. We wanted something that [if] you were living in *Skyrim*, it is different. It is the home of the Nords. Everything is based off them.”<sup>115</sup> This statement reveals a number of things, both about *Skyrim*’s creation as well as mental projections of medieval Scandinavia. That the whole storyworld of *Skyrim*, visual and otherwise, is built

---

<sup>114</sup> A Rolling Stone interview with the game’s lead developer, Todd Howard, cited that *Skyrim* had sold 30 million copies by 2016, five years after its release (Todd Howard, interview by Christ Suellentrop, *Rolling Stone*, November 21, 2016). In addition to numerous *Game of the Year* awards in 2011/2012, *Skyrim* also reached the #1 spot in top 100 games of all time for the ABC-affiliated website Good Game and the video games magazine PC Gamer (gleaned from *Wikipedia*’s page on *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*).

<sup>115</sup> Brenna Hillier, “Bethesda: *Skyrim*’s landscape is ‘epic reality,’” *VG247*, January 27, 2001, <https://www.vg247.com/2011/01/27/bethesda-skyrims-landscape-is-epic-reality/>.

around the Nords, means that the world Bethesda created was an explicit attempt to create a Nordic landscape for their Nordic people, and that the two were assumed to be inextricably connected. That landscape is also teeming with creatures deeply ingrained into medieval Scandinavian literary consciousness, including wolves, bears, eagles, deer/elk, sheep, horses, trolls, giants, draugr,<sup>116</sup> and, as the main problem plaguing *Skyrim* that the player/character must deal with, the dragons, returned after thousands of years and assumed by the inhabitants of the land to be mere myths.

The northern character of the natural landscape is mirrored by the manmade one, with buildings, settlements, crafts, language, names, religion, politics, subsistence patterns, and other such cultural elements emulating real-world features of medieval Scandinavia. *Skyrim* is divided into nine holds or districts, each of which has a major city or town that is the seat of power for the district's jarl (Old Norse for 'earl'). Buildings are either made of wood, in the half-timbered style with thatched roofs (some larger ones even resemble stave churches), stone in the cities, or a combination of the two, and the iconic hall buildings of Iron Age Scandinavia figure prominently into the architectural corpus of *Skyrim*. Halls appear in both settlements and out in the landscape; mead halls, feasting halls, halls for retainers and halls for guilds of champions dot the landscape, as well as great halls like the one atop the high hill in Whiterun, one of the hold-capitals, that acts as the jarl's court, residence, and stronghold.

Complex religious, political, and social issues intertwine in the plot of *Skyrim*, and a brief survey of this will also illustrate several of these references to the "North" and medieval Scandinavia. The player/character enters *Skyrim* in the midst of a rebellion-turned-civil war, which was prophesied to precede the return of the dragons, caused by the killing of the High King of *Skyrim*, Torygg (ON *tor* + *yggr*, 'Þórr the terrible/ terrible Þórr') by the Jarl of Windhelm, Ulfric Stormcloak (ON *úlfr* + *ríkr*, 'powerful wolf' or 'wolf king') in an attempt to win independence from the Empire of Cyrodiil (which resembles Imperial Rome to a great extent). The reasoning for this is that the Empire had lost a war with the Aldmeri Dominion, an alliance of various kinds of elves led by the supremacist Thalmor, and that the resulting treaty, the White-Gold Concordat, banned the worship of Talos in the empire. Talos is the deific name given to Tiber Septim (originally named Hjalti) who is in fact the founder of the

---

<sup>116</sup> The draugr (exact Old Norse spelling, no less) of *Skyrim* do not typically speak or terrorize people of the district as they do in the Icelandic sagas, however they *do* wield weapons and armor, know magic of various kinds and only inhabit the ancient Nordic barrows and tombs that figure prominently in *Skyrim*, defending their treasures and grave-goods from adventurers, tomb-robbers, and the player/character should they delve within. Many quests send the player to such barrows, and indeed one of the main storyline quests requires the player to retrieve the horn of an ancient Nordic hero.

Empire and conquered all of Tamriel and united it for the first time under one banner, and who is believed to have ascended to godhood upon his death, becoming the “Hero-God of Mankind.”<sup>117</sup> This goes against elven belief that no mortal is capable of becoming a god, and hence they used their victory over the Empire to enforce this and dispatched justicars to stamp out Talos worship, including in Skyrim. Believing that Torygg would never stand up for Skyrim and the worship of Talos, an important Christ-figure in Skyrim’s history and religion, Ulfric challenged him to a duel for the throne of Skyrim, and used the power of the Voice<sup>118</sup> to defeat him. The power of words in this storyworld is made manifest in the power of the Voice, reflecting the important relationships between words, speech, writing, reputation, and honor in medieval Scandinavian society, where in many stories and sagas, one’s word *is* one’s honor, and to use language offensively against another was as grave as physical assault.<sup>119</sup>

Depending on who the player/character talks to and asks about this duel, supporters of Ulfric will say the duel was fair and conducted according to ancient Nordic custom, and thus is not murder, while those who are more skeptical or who support the Empire view it as cold-blooded murder and a plain power-grab using a vicious shout with his Voice. This itself relates to medieval Scandinavian attitudes to killing, whether it is to be deemed a killing or a murder based on the actions of the perpetrators regarding the deed, and had to do with announcing the killing and allowing it to proceed to legal trial in the public eye or concealing the crime shamefully.<sup>120</sup> By announcing the duel (which Torygg was essentially unable to refuse), Ulfric sought to legitimize both the removal of Torygg and his claim to the throne on his victory, whether he is truly fighting for the well-being of Skyrim or for his own power regardless. At the same time, the differing opinions of people around Skyrim mirror the real power of the uninvolved public in medieval Icelandic legal process; “the uninvolved were a force to be reckoned with...they were the audience, they were the judges of the success of

---

<sup>117</sup> Text from the in-game book, *Varieties of Faith in the Empire*. The truth of his apotheosis is affirmed throughout the *Elder Scrolls* games, despite the beliefs of the Thalmor and other elves, in the proffering of the Blessing of Talos on the player/character by praying at his shrine, as well as other tokens associated with Talos/Tiber Septim having efficacious uses that prove his divinity.

<sup>118</sup> The Voice (Thu’um in *Elder Scrolls*’ dragon language) refers to a type of magic that uses dragon language to project words of power that have various effects, including destructive ones. Although originally only possessed by the dragons, it was taught to mankind long ago and is particularly widespread amongst the Nords.

<sup>119</sup> Another aspect that is analyzed in William Ian Miller’s *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, viewing feud as a relationship identical in structure to gift exchange in medieval Iceland: “Spears thrown at someone are ‘gifts’ that demand requital (*Vall.* 8:257), as are broken bones (*Grett.* 78:249) and **insults** (*Njála* 44:114),” 182.

<sup>120</sup> Jesse L. Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 225-226. The distinction between *víg* and *morð* is based on *Grágás*.

most social interaction...the true merits of one's cause were theirs to determine."<sup>121</sup> Ulfric is banking on his "true sons and daughters of Skyrim" and the hope of victory in the civil war, and paints any Nords who support remaining in the Empire as traitors and treats Imperials and elves with contempt in a conflict that is religious, political, and ultimately racial.

Some of the mythological and religious elements of *Skyrim*'s Nordic culture reveal a strong reliance on the eddic mythological material of medieval Scandinavia. For instance, the king of the gods in the Nordic pantheon of Skyrim is the god Shor, who is a mix-and-match of a number of Norse mythological characters in one. Shor, rhyming of course with Þórr, is the god who created Nirn, the mortal plane, and breathed life into mortal beings. This project was achieved by tricking or persuading a number of other Divines into contributing some of their power (trickery, guile, and wit being the strong suits of both Óðinn and Loki), and for this his divine spark was torn out and he was doomed to death, as well as his body being split in two to form Tamriel's two orbiting moons (much like how Ymir is slain by Bor's sons and his body used to create the world amidst Ginnungagap).<sup>122</sup> Because of this trickery, Shor is beloved by humans, who believe they were created from nothing by him, and despised by elves, who are the descendants of the gods that Shor tricked and believe their mortality is his doing (they even know him simply as "the Trickster"). As the only Divine to have apparently died, he is referred to as "the Missing God," both in Skyrim and abroad in Cyrodiil (he, like the Norse gods, has a strong association with death as a result of this, and particularly like Óðinn, whose many wisdom quests revolve around his obsession with avoiding his ultimate doom at Ragnarøk). Lastly, the Nords are believed to be the descendants of the people who fought alongside Shor in the Dawn Era (the age of the deeds of gods, just after the creation of Nirn), and for this are rewarded with a special afterlife in Sovngarde (Danish and Norwegian *søvn* + ON *garðr* = "enclosure of sleep"). If they die bravely in battle, they are awarded entry into the Hall of Valor to feast and drink mead with Shor alongside the greatest Nord heroes and heroines of old, where they also spar daily and await a mysterious 'Last War,' when they will ride out with Shor to battle.<sup>123</sup> This afterlife, exclusive to the Nords, mirrors perfectly the myth of Valhöll, where Óðinn claims the souls of the worthiest heroes to feast and fight daily with him and await Ragnarøk, known as the einherjar.<sup>124</sup>

---

<sup>121</sup> William Ian Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, 188.

<sup>122</sup> *Gylfaginning*, 11 (lines 35-39).

<sup>123</sup> This Last War is only referenced in one place in the games, and not elaborated upon. However, mythologically speaking, it is clearly the same idea as Ragnarøk, a dramatic final battle where the fate of the gods and the world itself is decided.

<sup>124</sup> *Gylfaginning*, 21 (lines 27-29); 50 (lines 26-28).

With these and numerous other aspects built into *Skyrim*'s storyworld, it is clearly a prime example of medieval fantasy wherein the “North” has supplanted the “standard European fantasy” repertoire of games that came before (like *Fable* and *Dark Souls*) in a central position. Their stated intention of building a world around the race of Nords, fantasy stand-ins for medieval Scandinavians (in particular, Vikings), coupled with the game's extreme popularity and overwhelmingly-positive reception, gives *Skyrim* a critical position in the transference of polysystems in which the “North” has reached a more central position in popular culture and entertainment. It is rather safe to say at this point that, if asked about what comes to mind when considering “Vikings,” the average consumer of video games as a part of popular entertainment media would indeed recall *Skyrim* as a significant contributor to their mental images of the “North,” alongside Marvel's *Thor*, History Channel's *Vikings*, and HBO's *Game of Thrones*. Thus, as far as popular and cultural memories of the “North” are concerned, the contributions of *Skyrim* are quite important to consider for the latest generations, as it supplied people with a masterwork of aesthetic illusion that completely centered on an explicit storyworld of the “North.” With its release in late 2011, the same year as the first *Thor* movie and the first season of *Game of Thrones*, and *Vikings* only two years later, the “North” was definitely on people's minds.

### **Jotun: “Ek er Þóra, Jötna bani!”**

The final game to be discussed is Montreal-based Thunder Lotus's *Jotun*, released in 2015. It requires the least explanation and description of all the titles discussed in this thesis, as it simply *is* Norse mythology, delivered diegetically in a beautiful game with hand-painted animation following the story of Thora, a female Viking warrior who has died at sea and must reclaim her honor by impressing the gods in a journey through the realms of Yggdrasil.

After having her life and the lives of her crew claimed by Rán, expecting to wake up in a “palace of seaweed and bones,” Thora is surprised to awaken at the foot of Yggdrasil, and makes her way to Ginnungagap, which serves as a central hub in the game for reaching the nine stages. There, the voice of Óðinn tells her to search each realm for a rune, which will allow her to challenge a Jotun and to impress the gods. All narration in the game comes from Óðinn's voice, describing certain elements of the game and urging Thora to rise to the challenges set before her, and from Thora herself, which comprises both her description of the places and things the player/character encounters in the game, and her internal monologue of her life leading up to the events of the game. All this dialogue is delivered in Old

Icelandic, performed by Icelandic voice-actors, with English subtitles, giving the game and its storyworld an authentic feeling.<sup>125</sup>

Along the way, the player is introduced to many famous elements of Norse mythology, from Mimir's well to the Æsir and the cosmogony related to Gylfi in *Gylfaginning*. They encounter creatures like draugar, disir, valkyrjur, dwarves, and, of course, the jötnar for which the game is named. Many familiar characters from the Old Norse literary corpus make appearances, such as Nidhögg, Ratatoskr, and Veðrfölnir, who are seen while Thora criss-crosses the branches of Yggdrasil; the Æsir and their powers are introduced via encountering their statues and gaining powers through their blessing, while Thora hails them and sings them praises; Ymir and his descendants, and Auðumbla, are described in detail as Thora traverses pools of Ymir's blood, also telling of how Bor's sons slew Ymir and crafted the world from his body. The jötnar are the five main opponents of the game, and are embodiments of the runes Thora collects rather than any known characters from the myths: they are Jera, Fé, Isa, Hagalaz, and Kaunan, and upon their defeat, Óðinn presents himself as the final challenger before Thora can redeem her disgraceful death and earn her place in Valhöll (or Valhalla in the subtitles). Upon cracking his armor, Óðinn is truly impressed and admits defeat, and valkyries arrive to cast a beam of light in the shape of a valknut, which rockets Thora upward, across Bifröst, to the foot of shining Valhöll, where Óðinn and Frigg welcome her. Player's will complete the relatively short but well-crafted experience offered by *Jotun* and walk away with a working (albeit somewhat rudimentary) understanding of Norse mythology, as preserved by the eddic material.

What separates this game from the previous three titles is that this game was developed and published entirely in-house by the much smaller Thunder Lotus Games of Montreal, Canada, a tiny company compared to giants like Bethesda and Lionhead. Furthermore, *Jotun* is the studio's first title, the success or failure which is the determining factor that makes or breaks new game companies like this one. This indicates that they chose to gamble on popular culture's recent infatuation with all things Viking, at this point five years after the release of *Skyrim* and well into the complete television domination of *Game of Thrones* and *Vikings*. The bet paid off, it seems, (even though it has not witnessed nearly the same levels of exposure and success as big hitters like *Skyrim* and *Dark Souls*) and *Jotun* was released to overall positive reviews and genuine appreciation of players; in 2017, Thunder

---

<sup>125</sup> 'Authentic' in the sense that players of *Jotun* will have the story and mythological descriptions delivered to them in an approximation of the original language in which they were written down and preserved. The narration is not purely Old Icelandic, but mixes modern and the approximated medieval pronunciation.



Lotus released its second game, though not having anything to do with Norse mythology, but demonstrating that *Jotun*'s successful launch and reception has secured the company's foundation in the gaming world.

The success of *Jotun* suggests that current trends in popular entertainment media have favored "Viking" storyworlds – ultimately derived from the medieval Norse material – and that imaginings of the constructed "North" have reached a central position in the polysystem of popular culture. This is a development from adaptive receptions of the medieval material, epitomized by the works of Wagner, Tolkien, and other romantics, toward more direct engagement with the storyworld of the "North" (as in *Skyrim*) and with the sources themselves (as in *Jotun*, where adaptation is minimized to formatting and medium rather than in content). At the same time, *Jotun* is an interesting example because it features a female Viking warrior as its protagonist and player/character, whose name is a female variation on that most famous of the Norse gods, Þórr. This choice no doubt is an intersection with larger feminist trends in not only gaming, but in the overall entertainment industry, answering the calls of consumers for stronger female characters and leads in stories. Thora does her namesake proud, demonstrating great strength and courage in wielding a huge double-headed battleaxe as her weapon of choice, and earning the respect of her father, a chieftain and famous Viking, and eventually taking his place as raid leader and captain of the longships (just like Hervör does in *Hervarar saga*). While it is unlikely this sentiment is the main force behind a renaissance in Viking fascination of late, it is certainly a factor, which is mirrored in the popular character of Lagertha in the History Channel's *Vikings*, a shield maiden and wife of Ragnar loðbrók who also becomes ruler of Norway, based on the figure of the same name in Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*.<sup>126</sup> The movements for gender equality that are occurring all over the world in many different societal spheres are being mirrored in our popular culture and stories, and the valkyries, shield maidens, and other strong women of medieval Norse literature have made it an attractive source for character types to address and reflect these changes and desires. Thus, *Jotun* represents both the confidence of a new and small game studio to rely on the popular fascination with Vikings and medieval Scandinavia for the success of their debut title, as well as the feminist turns that are occurring in popular media and the sufficiency of Old Norse literary repertoires to satisfy the need for strong female characters.

---

<sup>126</sup> Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum: The History of the Danes, Vol. 1*, ed. Karsten Friis-Jensen, transl. Peter Fisher (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2015), 633, 639.

## CONCLUSION ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The four titles selected paint a picture of the development of medievalisms used within the high-fantasy RPG genre of video games in the past decade and a half or so, illustrating the emerging trends and growing popularity of the medieval North and Viking subjects as repertoires for new stories. This analysis served as a case study to test the theoretical framework assembled in the first half of the thesis. The first pair of examples show the status quo of general European fantasy before this Nordic turn: while their storyworlds are based largely on Tolkien, they are as a consequence based on Tolkien's adaptation and transformation of medieval sources, and they are therefore suffused with embedded tropes from Old Norse literature. The latter two then reveal the change in course of medieval fantasy RPGs to refocus on the "North" as a constructed mental image of the ancient and medieval north of Europe, and then on the actual medieval sources themselves in some cases (as in *Jotun*). This "North" was theorized in the first chapter to be an amalgam of interpretations and receptions of medieval history from the north, combining facts with various fictions to create impressions, images, and ideas which spring to mind and form collective perceptions of the North and northern peoples.

The ascending popularity of Vikings can also be seen in various other spheres of society, within entertainment and popular culture and without, as polysystem theory maintains that nothing occurs in a vacuum. As mentioned, Marvel's *Thor* movie adaptations represent another vector where Scandinavian myth and culture have arisen in the public consciousness, and it is interesting to consider that the first film was released in 2011, the same year that *Skryim* was released and the first season of *Game of Thrones* aired. A poignant example of how powerful the draw of Vikings and the "North" have become in popular culture is found in the game series *God of War*, perhaps one of Sony's PlayStation's most renowned exclusive titles. The franchise began in 2005 and has had sequels published for successive generations of PlayStation consoles since the PlayStation 2, remaining one of the most acclaimed PlayStation games of all time. The games based their storyworlds, gameplay, and characters completely on Greek mythology, following the story of Kratos, a warrior of Sparta and son of Zeus who becomes the pawn of the schemes of the Hellenistic gods and seeks vengeance for their machinations. Running through four successive titles in this Greek storyworld, the fifth installment, simply titled *God of War*, rebooted the series after the five-year gap since the last game and featured a complete reimagination of the storyworld into one

based off of Norse mythology. To take a formula that had both created and guaranteed the success of their franchise and to change it so radically based on the flavor of the times shows the power of attraction currently held by the “North” in popular culture and society. The reinvention was a great success as well, earning the new *God of War* the fourth-highest rating of all time for PlayStation 4 games.<sup>127</sup>

While the “North” has been used as a source of relatively benign artistic influence for media like the games discussed above, it has also been recently (re)appropriated for more sinister purposes. One such socio-political dimension in which the polysystem of the “North” has migrated inward towards a central position, that demonstrates how the “North” is a heterotopia which can be used and abused for varying purposes to reflect an agenda that is projected onto it, is the rise of white nationalism that has occurred in the past decade. To say that popular culture and collective perceptions of the “North” and northern history and peoples have played a role in racist, supremacist, and xenophobic rhetorical adaptations of medieval Scandinavian culture is a given, as the modern nationalist movements have roots in those of earlier centuries which also consciously made use of this material.<sup>128</sup> However, it would be interesting to explore the extent to which new media and modern cinematography have influenced the new waves of nationalism and Norse appropriation, by which these storyworlds are brought into a more vivid realization than was previously possible. Stefanie von Schnurbein has posited understanding Norse revivalism as an “art-religion,” and how fictional works by both neo-pagan authors and authors who draw inspiration from Norse myth and the line of romanticism descended from Wagner and Tolkien have been cited by modern Ásatruers as major influences on their re-creative religious practices and imagination.<sup>129</sup> Her work, in particular, offers a wide view of neo-pagan revivalism and the reception of Norse material with an eye toward historical dynamics, and a more focused study on the role of popular culture in this revival and in broader, collective perceptions of the “North” and medieval Norse culture could be quite revealing, considering the propensity for white nationalists to reference Vikings and Norse culture.

In *Skryim*, for instance, I discussed how the leader of the Nord rebellion, Ulfric Stormcloak, employed rhetoric that polarized him and his “true sons and daughters of Skryim” from Imperial sympathizers and the other races that make up the Empire,

---

<sup>127</sup> This is according to the chart on *Metacritic.com*, which aggregates scores and ratings from numerous critical and journalistic media outlets into a coherent score and places titles alongside each other for comparison. <https://www.metacritic.com/browse/games/score/metascore/all/ps4/filtered?sort=desc>.

<sup>128</sup> Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*, 26-28.

<sup>129</sup> Schnurbein, *Norse Revival*, 298.

particularly elves. While one can clearly get the sense this was done in order to create a more immersive, complex world with its own social realities for players to explore and navigate (diegetic racial tension of this kind is present in the previous *Elder Scrolls* games), with no external racial agendas apparent, it is feasible to consider how players with existing racial-leanings could draw inspiration and racial pride from a game such as *Skyrim*, as well as from one such as *Jotun* (despite having a female protagonist, as racism and sexism usually walk hand-in-hand in white supremacist ideologies).

Rather than to say this is any fault of the games themselves, it is more an indication of the way the “North” is a body of mental images, ideas, and perceptions that is fed from many rivers of society and culture. As mentioned before, Scandinavia has characteristics that facilitate its characterization as a heterotopia, especially its geographic and mental “distance” from the rest of Europe and from America. While many features are projected onto the “North” from afar, some arise from within, such as the widespread marketing campaigns from Nordic countries aimed at advertising their beautiful, unspoiled nature to tourists (especially true of Iceland). Such notions of “pure” and “incorrupt” nature find themselves being blended by some parties with older ideas of “race and place” and *Volkgeist*, à la Herder, which associate the character of a “race” or people with that of their landscape and place of heritage, leading to ideas of a “pure race” of white Nordic people inhabiting Scandinavia like a racial Holy Grail. The interplay between images that are projected onto the North by the rest of the world and those which are projected outward by the Nordic countries themselves form some of the strongest overarching perceptions of the “North.”<sup>130</sup>

At the same time, interference and interaction between numerous systems make up a polysystem of the “North.” This system is an amalgamation of memories both “factual” and “fictional,” as in those which are drawn from the medieval sources and historical study, and those which are fictional adaptations or romantic receptions, which draw inspiration from the medieval past and create a layer of separation between their audiences and the source material (i.e. Tolkien’s works). It is a continuum which is functionally diachronic and never static, as each successive work that utilizes a repertoire such as one offered by the “North” is simultaneously drawing and building upon those memories while it then creates new memories in its consumers (as a new way/form/medium through which to experience the

---

<sup>130</sup> Cf. W. Tad Pfeffer, “People and Place in the Far North: a Vision of Life, Community, and Change,” in *Images of the North: Histories – Identities – Ideas*, ed. Sverrir Jakobsson (Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2009). He describes how “the Arctic has been in many cases reduced to a symbol and adapted to many diverse purposes... The combined effects of these images produce a warped picture of the Arctic and a sense of detachments—that the arctic is part of another world, unrelated to our own” (85).

“North”) and thus has influence on forthcoming products after it. How films featuring the “North” or elements thereof intersect with the “North” as it is portrayed in television, or in video games, comic books, opera, literature, etc. creates a web of systems overlapping and exerting forces on each other. This thesis has attempted to show the movement of the polysystem of the “North” from the fringes (a position it inhabited after WWII and the negative associations of Germanic myth and culture) toward a central, prime position in the spheres of popular culture through video games. A logical next step would be to see how this movement of the larger polysystem is comprised of, and affected by, the sub-movements and dramas played out between media systems and their own specific iterations of the “North,” and how each factor contributes to the broader perceptions and assumptions about the Scandinavian past.

Likewise, how images of the “North” are constructed individually is also a fruitful area of study, for instance how the high god in the pantheon of the Nords of *Skyrim* is Shor, clearly a reimagining of Þórr, and not a version of Óðinn who is the king and father of the *Æsir* according to *Snorra Edda*. Scrutinizing this process of memory-creation and mutual influence, which is the result of both remembering *and* forgetting (sometimes selectively and sometimes unconsciously), is advocated by Di Filippo.<sup>131</sup> He also demonstrates how Norse elements can mix quite easily with other literary and cultural elements, as they do in *Fable* and *Dark Souls*, and even in the more definitively “Nordic” titles like *Skyrim*, as cultural products always draw from numerous repertoires and bodies of material.<sup>132</sup> He writes succinctly how:

The increasing variety of references to Old Norse should encourage Scandinavian scholars to study how elements from the literate class in medieval Scandinavia became part of widespread cultural productions, which are reproduced in industrial quantities and shape a growing part of modern leisure activities and create interest in the North among people of all ages. Cultural dynamics of this sort illustrate the changes and variations of culture and class through time.<sup>133</sup>

Indeed, the importance of these dynamics lies in their capacity to show us the twists and turns taken by cultural lines of transmission. The story of how the *Íslendingasögur* wound their way from the turf houses of out-of-the-way medieval Iceland into some of the highest-grossing and internationally-popular cultural products and entertainment media of the present is a fascinating one. While others, like Schnurbein, study these lines of transmission to

---

<sup>131</sup> Di Filippo, “Contemporary Popular Culture,” in *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies*, 384.

<sup>132</sup> Di Filippo, “Contemporary Popular Culture,” 384.

<sup>133</sup> Di Filippo, “Contemporary Popular Culture,” 384.

discover how and why the medieval material has persisted through time in varying forms to emerge in modern culture and society as they have, I have sought here to analyze the ways in which the material has been received, altered, and deployed in the mass-produced, multibillion dollar industry of video games as a sub-system of global popular culture. This analysis has opened up other possibilities for further investigation as well. The framework assembled in the first chapter could be expanded to include other systems and media that make up popular culture, facilitating attempts to gain an understanding of which tropes from medieval Scandinavian literary culture have survived (remembering) and which have not (forgetting), and how such tropes have been transformed and used across popular culture, the everyday culture of the modern masses.

Video games are powerful works of aesthetic illusion which invite players to explore and tread realms of imagination made vivid and traversable through computer technology. They are an understated yet considerable force in the production of new culture and memories in the generations who are poised to inherit the world, shaping perceptions of reality through the stories they tell and the media they use to tell them. They are not alone in this, as other mass-produced and globally-deployed entertainment media are part of an overarching polysystem of popular culture, producing similar effects on consciousness and memory-formation and -transmission. The framework constructed in Chapter I from theories and analytical tools from various fields could be modified and used in future projects aimed at discerning the legacy and uses of Old Norse culture in modern popular media. Its use here was necessarily limited in scope, yet it has shown that repertoires related to the “North” have certainly moved inward towards central positions in systems of entertainment and popular culture in the form of video games, as well as in other media and certain social spheres that were mentioned.

Stories from the past retain a certain magnetism that fixes them in the cultural and social consciousness of people all over the world. People will return to them more or less frequently in relation to their present circumstances and those of the world around them, seeking inspiration, escape, wisdom, enjoyment, faith, etc. Global markets of mass culture and popular entertainment media have turned their attention to the medieval North as a “new” source of stories to tell and tropes to transform. This has reinvigorated collective memories about medieval Scandinavia in huge segments of the population that consume entertainment products, having a snowball effect on the prominence of this material in public consciousness and leading to further reception and transformation in new products. The construction of the framework and its testing in the case study have opened up further opportunities for this field

of research, such as more focused investigations into the reasoning behind this rise in popularity, and towards the consideration of other popular media which contribute to this phenomenon and images of the “North.”

The northern spark which captivated Wagner, Morris, Tolkien, and others in centuries past has once again captivated people today, who are able to draw upon and realize the repertoire of the “North” in new ways that were unavailable to prior romantics and enthusiasts. While underlying incentives (i.e. yearning for a simpler, more heroic time; ecological and social degradation countered by former fecundity and morality, etc.) may resemble those which led people to engage with Old Norse culture before, their deployment each time results in new and unforeseen uses and transformations of the material, creating another link in the chain of transmission and memory.

## Bibliography

### **Primary Sources (Modern & Medieval)**

*Dark Souls* (2011; Tokyo: FromSoftware), electronic game.

*Dark Souls 2* (2014; Tokyo: FromSoftware), electronic game.

*Fable: The Lost Chapters* (2005; Guildford: Lionhead Studios), electronic game.

*Fable II* (2008; Guildford: Lionhead Studios), electronic game.

*Jotun* (2016; Montreal: Thunder Lotus Games), electronic game.

*The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011; Rockville, MD: Bethesda Game Studios), electronic game.

~~~~~

*Hervarar Saga ok Heiðreks*. Edited by Gabriel Turville-Petre. London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1956.

Saxo Grammaticus. *Gesta Danorum: The History of the Danes, Vol. 1*. Edited by Karsten Friis-Jensen, Translated by Peter Fisher. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2015.

Snorri Sturluson *Gylfaginning*. Edited by Anthony Faulkes. London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1982/2005.

*Völuspá* (Konungsbók), *Eddukvæði I, Íslenzk Fornrit*. Edited by Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason. Reykjavik: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 2014.

*Völsungasaga: The Saga of the Volsungs*. Edited & Translated by R.G. Finch. London: Nelson, 1965.

### **Secondary Sources**

Assmann, Jan and John Czaplicka. "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity." *New German Critique* 65 (1995): 125-133.

Burke, Peter. *What is Cultural History?* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008.

Byock, Jesse L. "Social Memory and the Sagas: The Case of *Egils Saga*." *Scandinavian Studies* 76, no. 3 (2004): 299-316.

Byock, Jesse L. *Viking Age Iceland*. London: Penguin Books, 2001.



- Cole, Richard. "British Perspectives." In *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, edited by Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann, & Stephen Mitchell, 891-898. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018.
- Di Filippo, Laurent. "Contemporary Popular Culture." In *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches*. Edited by Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann, & Stephen Mitchell, 380-386. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018.
- Even-Zohar, Itamar. "Polysystem Theory." *Poetics Today* 11, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 9-26.
- Even-Zohar, Itamar. "The 'Literary System.'" *Poetics Today* 11, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 27-44.
- Even-Zohar, Itamar. "The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem." *Poetics Today* 11, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 45-51.
- Felce, Ian. *William Morris and the Icelandic Sagas*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2018.
- Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias." Translated by Jay Miskowicz. *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité* (October 1984): 1-9.
- Genette, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse: an Essay in Method*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980.
- Granholt, Kennet. "'Sons of Northern Darkness': Heathen influences in Black Metal and Neofolk Music." *Numen* 58, no. 4 (2011): 514-544.
- Grønlie, Siân E. *The Saint and the Saga Hero: Hagiography and Early Icelandic Literature*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2017.
- Hermann, Pernille. "Concepts of Memory and Approaches to the Past in Medieval Icelandic Literature." *Scandinavian Studies* 81, no. 3 (2009): 287-308.
- Hermann, Pernille. "Literacy." In *The Routledge Research Companion to the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*. Edited by Ármann Jakobsson and Sverrir Jakobsson, 34-47. London, New York: Routledge, 2017.
- Hillier, Brenna. "Bethesda: Skyrim's landscape is 'epic reality.'" *VG247*. January 27, 2001. <https://www.vg247.com/2011/01/27/bethesda-skyrims-landscape-is-epic-reality/>.
- Howard, Todd. *Rolling Stone*. Interview by Christ Suellentrop. November 21, 2016.
- Jón Karl Helgason. "Popular Culture." In *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches*. Edited by Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann, & Stephen Mitchell, 370-379. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018.
- Jón Karl Helgason. *Echoes of Valhalla: The Afterlife of the Eddas and Sagas*. Translated by Jane Victoria Appleton. London: Reaktion Books, 2017.
- Kaplan, Merrill. *Thou Fearful Guest: Addressing the past in four tales in Flateyjarbók*. Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2011.

- Klastrup, Lisbeth and Susana Tosca. "Game of Thrones: Transmedial Worlds, Fandom, and Social Gaming." In *Storyworlds Across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*. Edited by Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon, 295-314. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2014.
- Klevnäs, Alison Margaret. "‘Imbued with the Essence of the Owner’: Personhood and Possessions in the Reopening and Reworking of Viking-Age Burials." *European Journal of Archaeology* 19, no. 3 (2016): 456-476.
- Larrington, Carolyne. *Winter is Coming: The Medieval World of Game of Thrones*. London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2016.
- Miller, William Ian. *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking: Feud, Law, and Society in Saga Iceland*. Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- Mitchell, Stephen A. "U.S. Perspectives." In *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches*. Edited by Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann, & Stephen Mitchell, 866-875. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018.
- O’Donoghue, Heather. *From Asgard to Valhalla: The Remarkable History of the Norse Myths*. London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007.
- O’Donoghue, Heather. *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Short Introduction*. Malden, Oxford, Victoria: Blackwell, 2004.
- Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson. "Images of the North: Address by the President of Iceland, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson." In *Images of the North: Histories – Identities – Ideas*. Edited by Sverrir Jakobsson, 19-23. Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2009.
- Pfeffer, W. Tad. "People and Place in the Far North: a Vision of Life, Community, and Change." In *Images of the North: Histories – Identities – Ideas*. Edited by Sverrir Jakobsson, 81-90. Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2009.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure. "Texts, Worlds, Stories: Narrative Worlds as Cognitive and Ontological Concept." In *Narrative Theory, Literature, and New Media: Narrative Minds and Virtual Worlds*. Edited by Mari Hatavara, Matti Hyvärinen, Maria Mäkelä, & Frans Mäyrä, 11-28. New York: Routledge, 2016.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure and Jan-Noël Thon. "Storyworlds Across Media: Introduction." In *Storyworlds Across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*. Edited by Marie-Laure Ryan and Jan-Noël Thon, 1-21. Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, 2014.
- Scheel, Roland. "German Perspectives." In *Handbook of Pre-Modern Nordic Memory Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches*. Edited by Jürg Glauser, Pernille Hermann, & Stephen Mitchell, 913-920. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018.
- Schnurbein, Stefanie Von. *Norse Revival: Transformations of Germanic Neopaganism*. Leiden: Brill, 2016.

- Tan, Maurice. "The movies that inspired the Fable series." *Destructoid*. December 6, 2010. <https://www.destructoid.com/the-movies-that-inspired-the-fable-series-185106.phtml>.
- The Act Man. "Why is Dark Souls 1 A Masterpiece?!" Published July 24, 2018. <https://youtu.be/LqhtBsxAZNo>. YouTube video.
- Torfi H. Tulinius. *The Matter of the North: The Rise of Literary Fiction in Thirteenth-Century Iceland*. Translated by Randi C. Eldevik. Odense: Odense University Press, 2002.
- VaatiVidya. "Dark Souls Story: Gwyn & the Dark [Part 2]." Published February 14, 2013. <https://youtu.be/qopqgAtk0Q4>. YouTube video.
- Viðar Pálsson. *Language of Power: Feasting and Gift-Giving in Medieval Iceland and its Sagas*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Library, 2016.
- Winroth, Anders. *The Conversion of Scandinavia: Vikings, Merchants, and Missionaries in the Remaking of Northern Europe*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012.
- Wolf, Werner. "Aesthetic Illusion." In *Immersion and Distance: Aesthetic Illusion in Literature and Other Media*. Edited by Werner Wolf, Walter Bernhart and Andreas Mahler, 1-63. Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2013.