Reconstruction of Norse Myth in videogames: the case of God of War

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Abstract

The present study aimed to address the issue of modern myth making in interactive digital media, more specifically, myth reconstruction and myth adaptation in video games. Having carried out extensive analysis of corresponding literature, we have conducted a case study of *God of War* (2018). To gather data for the case study, we have accessed developer's diaries of Santa Monica Studios, and played through the game to get a better understanding of the setting and myths reflected in it.

Analysing the collected data, we have used Joseph Campbell's theory of universal repeating patterns that could be seen in various folklore traditions across the globe. We explored this concept first and then looked at the narrative of the chosen game to single out the pattern. It has been found that the *God of War* (2018) indeed follows the same structure as described in Campbell's theory, which allows us to make a conclusion, that video games are the essential contributors to modern myth making as the continuation of human storytelling tradition.

Among other findings of our research, we have explored how examples from the game adapt the original mythological sources. It has been established that via adapting a myth it is possible to reinterpret it to create an original story with its own complex lore and environment while staying faithful to the main events of the myth.

To conclude, it could be stated that further study in this area could address another level of storytelling in video games, i.e. lore and in-game mythology, rituals and traditions.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The stories we tell define us as human beings and allow people despite their cultural background to connect and share experiences of the human reality. Myths, the manifestations of our cultural and linguistic legacy, are essential for storytelling, because they allow people to express their unique understanding of the world (Campbell, 1991). For example, Old Norse poetry, Skaldic poetry, is unique in the sense of metaphors used. In one of the oldest written mythological sources of broadly Scandinavian literature such as *Snorri's Edda* or *Younger Edda* provide advice for aspiring storytellers on both their method and the background knowledge they have to possess in order to be good skalds (Sturluson, Larington 2014). However, it is fascinating how difficult it is to transfer these metaphors and this unique to the Old Norse world image into other languages; it is safe to say that it is practically impossible to do so without losing some one the implications and connotations that the original metaphor uses (Gurevich, 1975). The only possible solution is to retell the mythic plot and adapt it for the language and context it is being translated into.

This technique, relevant for such a minor issue as metaphor translation entails a bigger subject for discussion: myth adaptation in modern environment and modern media.

1.1 Background and context

While according to such researchers as J. Campbell it is true that myths never completely disappeared from our life, no matter how secular the society we are born into is, it is also true that the way we think about the myths has changed. The word myth has had a definition of being something untrue or non-existent before (Tikhonova, 2018), however, now it has become usual for us to call anything false a 'myth'. Although it is still referred to as stories of the past that our forebears used to cherish and live by (Leeming, 1990), the other meaning is usually connected to the social or political definitions myths, i.e. stories that are made specifically to influence people in order to sell a product or even an ideological campaign (Tikhonova, 2018).

Nevertheless, the ancient mythological stories as a part of human legacy still find reflection in our storytelling mediums. They are being shared, retold, transformed for the needs of creativity, but they never completely are forgotten. For example, although

most of the information about Slavic mythical model has been erased with the conversion of people to Christianity, myth still lives in countries of Slavic origin in their rituals, superstitions and celebrations, e.g. Maslenitsa festival in Russian culture.

It is beyond any doubt that the last century has brought many changes into human life: the generations born before the 1970s witnessed drastic changes during their lifetime, including the development of information technology, the emergence of digital media and the development of digital and interactive means of storytelling. As a result of quick technological advancement of humanity, myths adaptations has seen a new rise, as cinematography and video game industry adapts old models and patterns, e.g. *The Hero's Journey* pattern in such series of films as *Star Wars* or *How to Train Your Dragon.* Interactive storytelling in the shape of video games has opened a new world to content creation, and it has put many challenges in front of game developers, including such issues as what to adapt, how to share the atmosphere of the myth with a player and how to build interactive environment in the enclosed world of a story.

1.2 Research question

As a new interactive and highly immersive means of myth adaptation, video games often follow the same pattern and produce the same archetypal characters in their stories as it could be seen in the myths. The research conducted in the field of comparative mythology by such scholars as Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell suggests, that the idea of monomyth, or repetitive patterns found in myths in various cultures across the world, is relevant for modern storytelling, too.

This paper aims to understand the means through which this idea is reflected in a video game environment, specifically on the example of *God of War* (2018). It is also a high priority for us to discover the role video games play as interactive means of storytelling in modern myth making. Our primary objective would be to see how video games are engaged into this process in the sense of creating a separate unique world with its own rules, mechanisms, environment ('adapted nature' (Hutcheon, 2012)) and similar to mythological plot structure, at the same time remaining myth adaptations, a continuation or a 'spin off' of an already existing story.

The relevance of this question lies in the above-mentioned change of storytelling traditions and means of their development. In order to understand the new mediums

of storytelling, adjust to them and find beyond entertaining applications, e.g. educational application, it is essential to look at video games as the new myths, but also as the continuation or rather re-imagination of the old mythic traditions. In this paper, the mythological duality of video games will be explored in the case study of *God of War* (2018), a recent product of the Santa Monica Studios.

1.3 Methodology

During the early stages of planning and developing present research, it was decided that it would be best to start from analysing the notion of myth and corresponding theories. It is important to have a solid grounding on the topic because it constitutes the core of our theory. The next step is to lead the discussion of myth into the application of mythology today, leading us to the concept of adaptation, a core idea on the basis of which we conducted the comparative analysis in Chapters Four and Five. Overall, it could be seen that there is an abundance of theories surrounding the notion of myth and the notion of adaptation separately. It is necessary, however, to investigate the connection between these two topics in the modern environment of interactive digital media and conduct a case study on a fascinating example of myth adaptation and recreation in the *God of War* (2018) video game by Santa Monica studios.

To understand the world construction and creative decisions made in designing the game and adapting the myth in it better, a study will be held to examine developer's diaries and interviews with the writing team and creative director, Cory Barlog. What is more, it is essential to get personal experience of playing the game, so in order to get lore information directly from the game, a precise study of game narrative via play through will be conducted.

Thereafter, a comparative analysis has to be carried out with preliminary consultation with the original resources, i.e. *Elder* and *Younger Edda*s. In our opinion, it will illustrate best theoretical points expressed in the Chapters 2 and 3. We singled out the images we aimed to explore in the study, and then correlated them with their counterparts in the game. The model for analysis was structured as following:

1) What was adapted?
2) How is it different from its mythological image/pattern?
3) Why it was adapted in this manner? (i.e. the reasons for adaptation)

4) What is the purpose of alternations?

1.4 Document Roadmap

Chapter 2 will review relevant literature in thematically, starting from the existing research on the topic of storytelling traditions and myth as its expression, exploring fundamental components of this notion, including its definition, functions, the role it plays in contemporary society and its connection with popular culture.

Chapter 3 will deal with the notion of adaptation and looks onto the concept of myth adaptations, most importantly in interactive digital media, i.e. video games. It will also provide a collective conclusion for Chapters 2 and 3, summarizing acquired information about myth and adaptation today, and the manifestation of Norse mythology in video games.

Chapters 4 and 5 will conduct case study of the *God of War* (2018) game, exploring Norse myth in action. Chapter 4 will to give a general overview of the game, providing information of the game backstory, the universe and main characters, and will carry out a comparative study of plotline in accordance to the '*Hero's journey*' mythological model (Campbell, 1968).

Chapter 5 forms the second part of the comparative analysis, but it will examine the images of such characters as Baldur, Jörmungandr and Valkyries in the game and in their mythological counterpart. It will also provide a conclusion derived from the comparative study of the game.

Finally, in Chapter 6 the findings of the paper will be discussed as well as potential applications, possible further work and limitations of the study.

Chapter 2

Storytelling and myth

2.1 Literature review

From the times of Ancient Greece to the present day, philosophers have been questioning what makes us human, trying to discover the intricate way our minds work. It is reflected in the works of Plato, e.g. in his *Republic*, where he discusses human society and governmental organisations, or, for example, René Descartes, who explores the nature of human mind in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Our society is a highly complex environment, and many studies have been dedicated to examining our collective and individual development throughout the centuries, including scholarly works of J. Campbell, C. Jung and M. Eliade.

Storytelling is one of the basic and most effective ways of interaction inside a society. From the ancient times, our speech and the languages we as a human kind developed, provided early humans with new means of storytelling, provoking the emergence of traditions, cultures, and myths. The oldest written mythological plots carved in the clay tablets or on the hidden rocks across Ireland depict the experiences humankind tried to record and share centuries before digital storytelling first emerged (Connelly, 2015).

According to some scholars (Gurevich, 2000), the place of myth in human life have been first discussed back in the times of Ancient Greece. Rejecting the apprehensive function of myth, such philosophers as Aristotle and Plato viewed it in the sense many people would use it today: as a fairy tale, something non-existent. However, even they admitted that myths are very characteristic of their broad recognition by the society. That is a similar idea that could be traced to the scholars of the 19th and 20th centuries, specifically the ideas of C. Jung, J. Campbell, D. Leeming and R. Barthes. Although 'myth' would usually be referred to as "stories by means of which our forebears were able to assimilate the mysteries that occurred around them" (Leeming, 1990), other researches such as Barthes were looking at the myth in a more contemporary context, as 'dominant ideologies that shape the society and are born, reshaped and repurposed within it' (Barthes, 1973). The notion of myth, as it could be seen, fluctuates from researcher to researcher; however, the dominant idea of myth being rooted in the deeper part of the consciousness of the society is reflected in the majority of works mentioned.

The shared human experience that transcends individually and consciously acquired knowledge is mainly discussed in Jung's *Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious.* Similar to what could be seen in Campbell's works *Pathway to Bliss* and *The Power of Myth,* scholar distinguishes an idea of the "collective unconscious" (Jung, 1968) of humanity, a deeper self of the society omnipresent in every member of it. Whereas Jung discussed it primarily in the context of transformations in the human psyche (Smith, 2013), Campbell developed this idea into a universal mythical model that could be singled out almost in every culture, the concept of the *monomyth* or the *hero's journey myth* (Campbell, 1968). This concept corresponds to another Jungian idea, the archetypes, which is important for our understanding of mythological narrative and its structure in general. Whereas Campbell mostly speaks about the stages of a journey in his *monomyth* concept, i.e. call to adventure, initiation, return with experience, Jung focused his research of images of characters that appear in the myths, e.g. Magician, Caregiver etc. As discussed in R. Rensama's comparative analysis of these two scholar's work, it seems that Campbell developed his model to represent a fixed pattern. Certainly, it involves several alterations in the stages of *hero's journey*, but mostly the theory remained unchangeable with time. Jung, on the other hand, argued that within his core archetypes could emerge many new variations over time (Rensama, 2011).

Jung, along with Campbell argued that religions come from myth and they serve as an explanation and protection from the 'monstrousness of the universe' (Jung, 1968). Campbell in developing his functions of myth singles out a specific function that deals with the described explanation, the *cosmological* function. It also can be connected with the notion of Axis Mundi, the cultural reference point of a society from which it orders the unknown. Although it is not widely discussed in cultural studies as a non-physical place but a concept (Schipkov, 2015), it is important to bear in mind that myths could function as a means of establishing this Axis Mundi, aiding society in its quest of conquering the Chaos. As it has been discussed, even most modern myths function as such nowadays, too.

Interestingly enough, it could be mentioned that Jung struggled to say whether the myths exist today (Jung, 1991), yet Campbell argued that myths have never seized to exist and continue to be created and reformed (Campbell, 1991).

Thereby, as it has been shown, although researchers still argue how to define myth and what place it has in our society, there is no doubt that myth as a storytelling tradition played and still plays an important role in human life (Campbell, 1991).

Myth can be understood not only in its traditional sense as 'symbolic tales of the ancient past' (Magoulick, 2004). Scholars such as V. Tikhonova and M. Magoulick looked into the notions of social and political myths today, outlining its place and forms, e.g. advertisement (Tikhonova, 2018), political ideologies and popular culture. They argue that the uses of storytelling has changed, although it still have the power over human minds. They empathised the distinct features of modern storytelling, e.g. the speed with which new stories and myths seem to emerge, and the development of new means of storytelling.

One of the most popular topics for discussion in the sphere of storytelling today is video games industry. Despite being a relatively new field of research, the study of video games has become very popular since the late 1990s. Research is conducted from various sides to look at the issue in a multidimensional manner; for example, among others the effect of gaming on the psyche, the possible cognitive changes in the brain of video games players (Pallavicini, 2018), and the means through which video games reconstruct myths are studied. Such researchers as V. Asimos, E.Galanina & A.Salin, S. Mukherjee, A.Todor have discussed the ability of video games as an interactive and immersive means of storytelling to reuse, reinterpret and retell ancient myths, opening them to a wider audience and provoking new wave of interest in the cultural legacy of humanity.

Due to the fact that video games are an interactive medium where the player is in charge of the decisions and story development, it is established that myths in such medium are rather performed than showed (Asimos, 2019). There is supporting research that analyses mythological narrative inside video games (Galanina&Slain, 2017), as well as there are studies concerned with the replication of mythic structures in video games (Todor, 2010). Special attention is dedicated to case studies to illustrate existing mythological narrative within game environment.

It has to be stressed that although the myth reconstruction in video games is usually looked upon through the prism of adaptation, there is not an abundance of work that concentrates on the specific analysis of a myth adaptation in video games as a *product* of adaptation (Hutcheon, 2012). Such researchers as L. Hutcheon argue that video

game adaptations, whether mythic or not, tend to adapt the world more than the narrative of the original source. Being a highly interactive medium, they tend to strive to convey a general feeling of the story rather than the plot itself, to show small details that recreate the context of the adapted myth and use other means of immersion as music and visual effects.

Some work regarding adaptation of myth in videogames and containing case studies of games has been already performed (Wallin, 2007; Christesen, 2010). Due to the fact that Norse myth remains one of the most popular narratives in modern entertainment, there are many studies that discuss adaptations of Norse myth in popular culture general, i.e. in films and literature (Sanacore, 2015; Kuusela, 2014). However, there could be observed a lack of research in the field analysing specifically a myth-to-video game adaptation, which this paper aims to contribute to.

Nevertheless, before we could examine myth adaptations on the example of a case study of a video game, first we should investigate the roots of storytelling, look at the notions of myth and adaptation in detail, and explain how interactive media today contributes to myth interpretation and myth reconstruction.

2.2 Storytelling tradition

Early evidence supporting the idea of bards, minstrels and skalds playing an important role in ancient societies demonstrates that storytelling has held a special place in human society over an extended period (Bloomfield, 1992). As all human beings on Earth, storytellers were interpreting the reality and then sharing their experience of life, trying to find an anchor point from which a society can evolve. The concept we know today as Axis Mundi is what every society in the world stand upon and every person refer to as their central point in life (Schipkov, 2015). It could be a material sacred place, like the sacred mountains, temples or woods, or something existing only in the spiritual and religious consciousness, like the Yggdrasill tree for the ancient Scandinavian people or an island in the centre of the ocean with the world tree on it in Slavic mythology. In essence, it shaped the culture, and storytelling was and is a means of establishing core values and beliefs around the Axis Mundi. Thus, storytellers were the ones who would establish a centre for their society, a centre of the Cosmos, an explored territory, and aid to conquer Chaos, the unexplored darkness around the axis, transform it into known and familiar. Storytelling played a crucial role in this quest

of claiming the territory and expanding the knowledge of the world for every culture on the planet.

The first storytellers, the ones who broadened their knowledge further than other member of their society were, as Joseph Campbell, a well-known American scholar described in *the Power of Myth* noted, shamans. They were the original poets, narrators; they played an essential role in ancient societies all around the world. Having had an extraordinary spiritual experience, they would become the trailblazers for the further transformation of the territory from Chaos to Cosmos. They would tell stories to advice on what the tribe should do next, to solve inner conflicts or even to assign social status. All because they possessed the experiences, the wisdom and the power of being able to tell a story. Later on, in various cultures bards, skalds and other storytellers' art was greatly appreciated just as well, and they were always welcome in both villages and noblemen's castles.

An ability to tell a good story was highly valued many centuries ago, and is still respected in our society. It is indeed interesting how most of the traditional functions of storytelling remain relevant in the modern world. We still crave the stories about strange lands and cultures, different traditions and rituals, people, animals and ways of living etc., as we did many years before technology entered our lives and significantly aided the spread of storytelling traditions. Every human being from birth to death struggles to understand the world, and the stories we share and are being told helps to feed this desire, it provides little pieces to the big puzzle of life, it gives an understanding of the reality around us. We explore the world through the means of a story, a shared experience of something that may or may not have happened. The stories we tell children helps them to find their ground in life; it shapes them, educates and prepares for different kinds of experiences they are about to get in their adulthood. Storytelling can also establish moral laws and regulate the behaviour of members of the society, e.g. in the way we teach our children what to do and what not to do, illustrating it by a story of someone who broke a rule and was punished for that. Storytelling has a wide range of functions. It reflects our society as it is, at the same time it forms and shows our values, the roots of our traditions, the humour, and many cultural peculiarities that a nation can be characterised by.

Our ways of telling a story have certainly changed a lot. The first big change have occurred with the creation of writing systems, when oral folklore was fixed on stones, clay tablets, bark or paper to pass it to further generation and preserve in time, e.g.

Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* in Iceland or *Primary Chronicle* by Nestor the Chronicler in Russia. From old folk tales to literature, humanity has always found a way to express itself through the medium of words, retelling the events that did take place, altering the details to tell a 'better' story, and sometimes just creating an original story, putting their accumulated experience, feelings and thoughts together into a complete story. The purposes of stories could vary greatly, from solely educational to purely entertaining, but it is a result of an experience: collective or individual, and originally very characteristic of the culture of a storyteller, as it was created in that culture and for that culture. However, it should be said that nowadays many mediums of storytelling have seized to be a highly cultural experience, as the world met and embraced globalization. Surely, it is possible to distinguish a typical Hollywood film from a typical French film, or even the culturological background of an American-made game from one of the Polish production, but it is becoming uniform with the development of the corresponding industries.

With the invention of cinematography, there appeared a new way to tell a story. Although cinema drastically differs from literature in the sense of how to tell an impactful story, it originally started small. The first clips, short films simply depicted the reality of everyday life: a train moving (*Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat,* 1895), a horse running (*The Horse In Motion*, 1878). It was later, with the development of the technology that the stories told on a screen were becoming highly elaborate and complex in their plot, characters and other small details that influence the atmosphere and the flow of the film greatly. What we see in cinematography today continues the tradition of storytelling in many new and creative ways, but it still serves the same purpose: share an experience. The interest and high demand for visual storytelling is in human nature, as human beings respond more emotionally to the moving pictures, rather than the plain text (Yakovleva, 2010).

The end of the twentieth century has brought a new, interactive way of storytelling into the world. With the emergence of video games, digital storytelling has gained enormous popularity due to its ability to engage the player into the experience. Now the listener, the perceiver of the story appears to be in the very centre of the story, they experience it with their own eyes. The level of immersion that modern video games provide is truly spectacular, especially if we refer to the AR or VR games that are rapidly developing now. Similar to cinematography, first video games were just a reflection of the reality (*Pong, 1958).* It was much later when the games started to include complex

narrative and gameplay to support it. Now, it is safe to say that the game industry is highly story-oriented, and that is because of the desire to experience, to find answers, to relive and resurrect the old traditions in a modern way, finding this connection to our present through the past. For some it could certainly be more entertaining to involve themselves with mindless shooting of demons in the chambers of Hell, but even such a simple concept brings a story with it, which could be complex without much further development.

Storytelling has a gone a long way since the time the first human beings where sharing their experiences with each other. As it was already mentioned, it has played an important role of exploration and connection for the human kind throughout the centuries. Stories has taken many different forms, yet the first stories that reflected a deeper spiritual need of the society, that established their axis mundi, that provided core values and moral guidance were myths.

2.2 The notion of myth

Many researchers all around the globe were involved into mythological studies, including J. Campbell, K. Jung, R. Barthes, M. Eliade etc. They have proposed theories and developed ideas that now serve as a basis for further analysis of the topic. There have been many attempts to define the notion of myth in a comprehensive way, but it is not easy to come up with one exact definition that would cover all aspects of the myth. Indeed, it is a very broad term that covers many topics, from tales of heroes with underlying historical evidence of existence, e.g. the stories of *Ragnar Lothbrok*, to the tales of the gods and supernatural creatures. Amongst other possible interpretations, the notion of myth could be defined as following:

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

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

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

In essence, myth is a story, based on a tradition. It is the story that answers timeless questions and serves as a compass to the generations, passing on centuries of ancestral experience. It is highly dependent on culture and society in which it is developed; it is born out of the people, their values and knowledge of the world, their language. In fact, the word 'myth' itself comes from Greek '*mythos*', which literally means story or tale. Different form the general notion of 'story', mythic tales usually would usually have multiple layers of meaning, some accessible and understandable to any human being, some very specific to a single cultural reality.

The subject of myth could be of different kinds, but they all aim to explain the world around. The most typical ones could be the origin of the world (and that is where we get many origin stories in mythologies all around the world), the creation of the humankind. It could also be something more specific like the myths that concern the potentially dangerous creatures that inhabit Earth, e.g. the giant myths (e.g. *Jötunn*s in Norse myth and giants of Greek myth). No matter the topic of a story, myths offer comfort and familiarity; they provide guidance and give sacred meaning to life. It is one of the primary functions of the myth.

To get a better understanding of the place myth place in the society, it is necessary to look at other functions of the myth. According to Joseph Campbell's theory proposed in such works *as A hero with a thousand faces, Pathways to bliss*, there could be distinguished four main functions of the myth:

1) Psychological or pedagogical;
2) Metaphysical;
3) Cosmological;
4) Sociological.

Each of the functions relate to a distinctive part of human life. Thus, the *pedagogical* function is referred to as the one "carrying the individual through the stages of his life, from birth through maturity through senility to death" (Campbell, 2004). It identifies the individual within a society, guides them through the course of life and governs personal growth. One of the best examples to illustrate the pedagogical function is the rite of initiation common in many cultures. At a certain age, special ritual is to be held so that a boy coming of age can officially turn into a man, and develop within society for his and the community's sake.

The second, *metaphysical* function refers to the ability of a man to stand in awe in front of the 'marvels of the universe' (Campbell, 2004), take inspiration from it and get a desire to learn, to know and to explore. Natural human curiosity, triggered by the environment itself, reflects in this function of the myth. The strive to learn and the human creative drive are being powered by myth, embedded into us from the early years of our existence.

The *cosmological* function of the myth is to provide the picture about universe and explain the natural events a human being witnesses. It helps to make sense when nothing does, and it deals with the feeling of awe, too, encouraging curiosity about the world men inhabit, but finding an explanation to such natural phenomena as the change of day and night (e.g. two wolves chasing gods on chariots in Norse mythology), thunder (Thor riding his chariot in Norse mythology) etc. It manages the manner in which society orders Chaos and establishes the Axis Mundi, the reference point to develop from.

Finally, the *social* function refers to the ability of the myth to govern society, create rules and order for a fruitful and successful advancement of each of its members. It sets "a shared set of rights and wrongs, proprieties or improprieties, on which your particular social unit depends for its existence" (Campbell, 2004). It was of utmost importance for the societies to create of social bonds between people, giving each own rights and assigning roles. However, nowadays, as Campbell argues, this function has seen the most change due to scientific and sociological advancement of humanity. We now question our world and the truths we knew before more, and it disrupts the traditional social functions within the society.

It is beyond any doubt that these functions could be applied to any known mythology in the world. It is also known that although some cultures and their narrative traditions could be drastically different from each other, it is possible to trace similar traits and tales in them. These common patterns are being studied by comparative mythology.

Campbell has described and developed the theory of *monomyth*, describing constantly repeated experiences of humanity, reflected in the myth. Monomyth could be seen in action in many different cultures that have never been in contact with each other, yet develop similar beliefs, traditions and rituals. They all tend to share a common structure, similar characters and repetitive patterns of behaviour, e.g. three stages of a hero's journey: *separation*, *initiation* and *return* (Campbell, 1968). A call to adventure

urges the hero to leave his normal life, face significant challenges on the way and return back enriched with experience. There varying opinions on how exactly humanity happened to share these patterns (e.g. structural or linguistic approaches), yet it goes beyond the goals of this paper to describe them, so we will not look at them in further detail.

Another scholar who made significant impact into comparative mythology was Carl Jung, who also studied the repetitive patterns of human behaviour. He proposed a theory of archetypes, common images that could be found in mythologies across the world. He argued that archetypes create myths and philosophical ideas, and they are the key components of most situations in our day-to-day life.

On the basis on mythological functions we have looked on, and the idea of repetitive patterns in various myths across the world, it is now possible to single out several key characteristics that allows us to call a story myth in the traditional sense. First, myth is a story that provides with a certain picture of the world. As it was discussed earlier, it is one of the main *cosmological* functions of the myth. Secondly, in a myth the protagonists are often of supernatural or divine origin, e.g. the daughter of a king becoming a Valkyrie in Norse myth. Next, the times of the action in myth usually takes place long before the moment it is being told. The story could also switch "realms" or worlds, and heroes traveling into supernatural is often involved. These heroes also tend to possess superhuman power, i.e. shapeshifting, superhuman strength or even appetite (e.g., the story of Thor in the Útgarða-Loki's castle). Through the story, a message is conveyed; the message is aimed at a person of certain culture in a certain period, and it provided guidance, sets values and depicts traditions. What is more, myths are characteristic with the linguistic way of conquering the Chaos, the outside by giving names to places, gods, heroes, and people in the stories. The unknown in myths is usually presented as being scary and dangerous. Finally, as it was demonstrated, myths have definitive cultural traits to them, as they depict society they were born within.

2.3 Myth today

However, when we think of myth today, it is not always associated with old stories our ancestors used to shared their experience. It seems like the notion of myth split, and although we can still refer to it the same way Campbell and Leeming did, now it is ofter

associated with something false, untrue or with fairy tales with children as their target audience. In the age of rapidly progressing technological advancement, we see myths being created, debunked and forgotten every day. We are seeing false advertisement that uses stories with strong emotional impact to sell; we see fake news that create narratives that shape the political world today (Tikhonova, 2018). Social, political narratives create myths for people to follow them, and not necessarily out of the good intentions.

Under the influence of sociocultural changes that the world has seen, the mythmaking has undergone significant transformation. The emergence of new myths causes a shift toward less complex and less metaphorical narratives. Digital media nowadays plays an important role in distributing and creating new myths across the world, shaping human behaviour. One idea can create a whole movement based on a myth. It can aid the stabilization of the society in the times of crisis, providing people with guidance and a new idea of the future. It also can cause disruption of old traditions society followed before, destabilizing it. With the constant overproduction of information, people might feel lost in the environment of constantly changing and evolving myth.

It is cannot be denied that contemporary society is still largely engaged with myth living, myth making and myth distribution. Every person still gets back to the mythological source of life, and enacts myth in their day-to-day routine. It could be done through the rituals people still follow, e.g. saying prayers before food and bed, enacting rituals form the Christian myth, or via unspoken cultural rules, e.g. not touching a person's head in Thailand as it is considered to be the most sacred place of the body (Hughes, 1984). Humanity might have progressed immensely during the last centuries; we might have got scientific explanations of some of the natural processes and phenomena, we proposed bold theories and work constantly to satisfy our need for answers. We still have our old myths, yet it is possible that the religious aspect of them has been lost, as well as the rituals and sociological structure it once provided us with. However, the old myth today now comes in the form of superstitions, moral codes and etiquette, rules common in a society. Celebration of the holidays that take root in old beliefs or religion is the enactment of myth, e.g. refusal to take gifts across the doorway in Russian culture. People say 'it is bad luck' to pass gifts or even talk to people over the threshold, but in reality this tradition takes roots in the association of the threshold with the line between human world and supernatural world, between Chaos and Cosmos, ordered space. Therefore, even in small details our life now re-enacts its mythical legacy.

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

It is possible to say that accelerated globalization has greatly changed storytelling (Hutcheon, 2012). We have seen the process of interchange, adaptation and assimilation of stories cross-culturally. The rapidly increasing technological advancement and digitalization of information facilitated their unification. It is most clearly seen on the example of Norse Mythology, in the last few years used extensively in popular culture, e.g. in the *Marvel* cinematic universe, *American Gods* by Neil Gaiman or newer videogames like *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* or the *God of War 4.* Indeed, the use of myth in pop culture opens in to a wider audience and creates underlying interest to the original myth, but it also disrupts and distorts the image of the myth. Although it is true that the essence of myth is in its constant reinterpretation and re-evaluation by different storytellers, there are certain general truths that has been preserved through the years, e.g. Thor is the god of thunder, Apollo is the patron of Delphi and brother to Artemis.

Presented by a consciously changed detail of high significance, large amounts of people would not seek the origin of the story they witnessed on the screen or in a book, they would accept it as it is, and as a result could get a substituted image of what the myth consists of.

Modern storytelling also uses, creates new and alters traditional archetypes of mythology. Cinematography, for example, is one of the key myth providers today. It was mentioned before, that it is a newer means of storytelling, and it indeed contributes greatly to the formation of new ideas and myths. Along with the old mythological archetypes, new cinema clichés and standards are being utilised in modern storytelling. For example, the old Cinderella plot now is reused in such contrasting in genre films as *Ella Enchanted* and *Twilight,* and widely popular the cliché of a smart, sarcastic and full of their own personal issues yet likable man solving impossible cases (*BBC Sherlock Holmes*, *The Iron Man*, *Doctor House*) is a more recent invention.

We have seen that mythology today is a unique system satisfying the need of a modern human to be involved in mythological consciousness through which their relationships with the world are being built. As it has been discussed, modern mythology still possesses some traits characteristic of its ancient predecessor, but it also have

developed new traits. For example, myth as a narrative still provides society with the picture of the world. However, due to the rapidly changing pace of society development and as a consequence rapidly changing myths, the clash of different opinions, caused by a difference in the world image, can cause significant destabilization in the society. Secondly, the idea of myth heroes being 'above' human still has relevance in modern world, e.g. the protagonists of advertisements. Next, myths still have a strong ability to convey a message, make an impact and provide guidance, the ability which is being utilised in all different manners: from being a means to sell a product to making a strong political statement. Digital media, effectively facilitating communication in the world community, now serves as a main medium for myth creation and distribution. What is more, myths have ceased to exist as a product of a single culture; new myths are being made internationally due to the unfolding process of globalization. Finally, as humanity has developed immensely in the last centuries and has established many scientific truths, the purpose of myth as Chaos conqueror diminished; nevertheless, the tradition of 'naming the unknown' in order to understand it is still in action.

Overall, mythic storytelling now in any form, audial, visual or written is based on the same structure of plot development as the old myths once were. However, it often lacks the complexity, layered meanings and deeply metaphorical sense the old myths held.

Chapter 3

Adaptations in digital media

3.1 Adaptations and myth

Having looked closer into the notion of myth and its key components, we have also explored several ways of how myth and mythic storytelling are preserved in the modern world. We have mentioned earlier that modern storytelling still extensively uses old mythic models and even plots. Today myth has been adopted in many works of art, whether it is fine arts, cinematography, literature or dance. The mythical legacy that humanity carries in its DNA pushes us to relive and reproduce the old practices. There is no doubt how much artists, novelists and musicians took inspiration from the mythologies of their own and foreign cultures. For example, a Norwegian band Wardruna bases its music on the old skaldic tradition, Norse mythology and the ancient ways of life (Trendell, 2018). They argue, in their songs they try to convey the old wisdom, knowledge and culture and present in a contemporary way, so that the audience can both relate to the older mythological background and a more modern sound.

This leads us to the concept of adaptation, specifically modern adaptation of myths as "tales believed as true, usually sacred, set in the distant past or other worlds or parts of the world, and with extra-human, inhuman, or heroic characters" (Bascom, 1965). To see how mythic narratives are reconstructed and adapted today, first it will be of greater importance to define the notion of adaptation.

The term and its components have been discussed widely in scientific research the last few years. Most works predominantly concern cinematic adaptations of literature works (e.g. Cartmell, Constandinites) and rely on case studies that analyse the exact differences between fiction and its film adaptations.

As a continuation of storytelling tradition, adaptation is a product of creative interpretation of an existing story in any format: literary, cinematic, musical etc. It is also the process itself, an announced transfer of extensive characteristic elements of a story for the sake of creating something original (Hutcheon, 2012). These elements could be transcoded into another medium, e.g. a novel into a film, which allows more freedom for creative decision-making. Adapters could be compared to translators: they

have to decode a story and perceive it in a unique way before they can transform it into something original. It should be stressed that the mere action of transferring an original story into another medium would not be considered an adaptation, e.g. an audiobook. Although the narrator can allow themselves certain freedom in interpreting intonations of characters, the stress in sentences and the pace of the story, the elements of it remain the same, nothing is added nor omitted.

From the ancient oral folklore, during the times when writing systems were yet to evolve, every storyteller had their own way of telling a story. They would adapt it to their audience, alter details to create emotional connection and make a stronger impact. As an example of one of the earliest written literary works with elements of adaptation, we would suggest looking at an Old Norse work of literature, *Younger* or *Prose Edda*. Although it contains original tales exclusive to this piece of art, the origin of most stories could be traced to other widely known Norse tales such as *Saga of Hrólf Kraki,* or more famous *Elder or Poetic Edda. Prose Edda* was written in early 13th century, and it is believed that although Sturluson reflected many older myths relatively close to its oldest known variants, it is clear that he was under the influence of Christian ideology. For example, in the very prologue he mentions Christian God as the ultimate creator.

"*In the beginning God created heaven and earth and all those things which are in them; and last of all, two of human kind, Adam and Eve, from whom the races are descended*" (Sturluson, Larrington, 2014).

Snorri Sturluson was one of the last skalds of Iceland, and although he tried to live and resurrect the Old Norse tradition of storytelling, it was slowly going away, with the society changing and the realities evolving. However, his adaptation of the earlier myths has made a significant contribution to the mythological field of study, as well as the preservation of old traditions in modern Scandinavia and around the world. The manner in which traditional myths coexists in his work with newer Christian beliefs is an intriguing topic for research.

The question of what is the subject of an adaptation is very specific to the original work it is based on. However, generally it is assumed that the story denominates an adaptation, i.e. how true it stayed to the source. The story could be cut, expanded or narrowed down to the main plot line, its pacing could be altered, but usually it is the most recognisable element of an adaptation.

Among other common characteristic of an adaptation is the extent to which it remains true to the original work, i.e. the concept of fidelity (). Overall, adaptations tend to fluctuate in the number of elements they carry, but in addition to the ones already named, such essential attributes as themes, characters and their motivation, symbols and imagery, even world context could be transcoded differently during the process of adaptation, too. It is entirely dependent on the creator and their own view and feel of the original work in which proportion and to what extend these elements will be preserved or altered in the adaptation. For some, it is essential to capture the style and show the events as they are presented in the source, e.g. TV-series *Pride and Prejudice (1995)* and Jane Austen's novel. Others opt for a more abstract sense of an adaptation, e.g. in *King Arthur: Legend of the Sword (2017)*. Both examples are classified as adaptations. Therefore, as we see, the notion is very expansive.

As a part of storytelling tradition, adaptations are also highly dependent on the context they are being created within; it could be historical, political, social or even personal. Time and place, society and culture, outer events that take place in the world influence the way a creator first perceives, develops and idea and then expresses it during the adaptation process. For example, if we were to compare two different adaptations of Shakespeare's world famous play *Romeo and Juliet* in the shape of *Romeo+Juliet* (1995) by Baz Luhrman and *Romeo and Juliet* (1968) by Franco Zeffirelli, we will see considerable differences. The second work was staying closer to the 'spirit' of the original play, it is characteristic of the '60s filmmaking (such as the use of more the naturalistic approach to shooting, i.e. location shooting). *Romeo+Juliet* possesses typical features of a film made in the 90-s in Hollywood. The most popular genre at the time would be action, and the advancement of technology allowed broad experimenting with the cinematic devices. Each of the adaptations appealed more to the market of the era they were created within, and they are, in fact, products of their own time and culture.

The conventions of storytelling are changing every day. Digital platforms and technological progress now significantly change the way 'stories are made, distributed and consumed' (Hutcheon, 2012). The same applies to adaptations. Scientific progress drives them just as well as it drives myths and other means of storytelling. Now, the wide range of VFX, hyper realistic modelling, elaborate audio and sensor technologies gives creators a broad set of tools to bring their stories into life. Adaptations now get a new context, yet the old themes prevail. A recent adaptation of

a traditional Robin Hood story, *Robin Hood* (2018) by Otto Bathurst shows this characteristic trait well. Fast shots, many action scenes, rapid switches between shots and wide use of VFX is very in line with modern Hollywood action films. It also indicates another one of the features of adaptations, an ability to transform the genre of a story into something completely different.

Distribution of new media platforms opened the market to a wider public. The emergence of social media platforms, new simplified content creation tools like Movie Maker, Twine and Scratch allowed non-professionals to be actively engaged in interactive storytelling and story making. It also appeals more to the young audience and can serve as a very effective medium of educating children via play. Although it has already been happening before, today the increasing number of creators and adapters plays an important role in establishing stereotypes, which could be utilised for a wider audience response and more financial profit. The stereotypes could come in the form of film clichés, discussed earlier, or they could be a product of a highly successful myth adaptation, e.g. the image of Norse Gods is the Marvel Universe. Many important details have been changed, including the relation of Thor, Odin and Loki, but in the minds of many people, this image is now perceived as a truth, becoming part of their background knowledge.

With the emergence of video games a new interactive mode of adaptation was developed. It is a more complex, elaborate medium of storytelling because the player is in the centre of narration, and is deeply involved into story making. The world and its lore of many modern videogames is usually carefully developed, with its own original environment, characters, creatures and even societies. The story is being built in the changeable world of a video game where the player is deeply immersed into the unfolding of events.

For many games, it is of substantial importance to consider players' decisions and choices, so that the world around them could be built in a specific way. It alters considerably the narration techniques, and video games developers seek new and creative way to get their ideas across.

In literature adaptations, the immersion of a reader is closely tied to our imagination provoked by specifically chosen words. Cinematography influences our visual and audial perception; it is direct and does not require as much imagination as the books do. With all certainty, it could be said that this kind of narration also works for the

cinematic parts of some video games, 'cut-scenes'. However, video games are distinct in their interactive aspect, so other means would be used to convey emotions, world context and even implications for the future story development. Along with the visual appeal, music plays an important role in setting the mood, atmosphere and even context in videogame environment. The interactive aspect of video games, i.e. mechanics, 'what the player can do', is crucial to the narrative. The feel of mechanics, the way it is implemented into the story and blurred into the environment defines player's experience and their emotional investment. For example, in the most recent *God of War* (2018) game special attention was given to the way the main weapon, an axe feels. It concerns the visual look, animation of a strike or a throw, and kinaesthetic response provoked in the controller, i.e. vibrations. According to the creative director of Santa Monica Studios, play-testers reacted positively to such an approach (Polygon, 0:16-5:30).

3.2 Myth adaptations in videogames

Video game development is a very intricate process that demands simultaneous creation, application and testing of various mechanics, concepts, storytelling devices and fitting imagery. Contemporary industry has come a long way from the original 'just entertaining' *Pong* to the complexity with which developers carry the story to the players now. There could be identified many masterpieces on the video games market that are competitive to the best movies ever created, e.g. *The Last of Us* (2013)*, God of War* (2018)*, the Witcher: Wild Hunt* (2015)*, Uncharted 4* (2016)*, Dragon Age: Origins* (2009)*.* The level of emotional investment and player response, the involvement into the story in these games is truly fascinating. Moreover, more and more games touch upon such sensitive and challenging topics as loss, sacrifice, identity, mother-/fatherhood and human relationships in general. Video games teach lessons, convey human values and shows different aspects of life via an interactive story.

Despite the fact that the diverse variety of existing games develop their stories from a creative and original idea, the old mythological storytelling models could still be traced in them. The protagonist is challenged by the fate and brought into the midst of rapidly unfolding events. He goes onto an adventure to face many challenges on his way, but eventually completes the task, defeats evil, gains experience and becomes the champion of his people. With some alterations, it is relevant for every main character

of the mentioned games: Joel, Kratos, Geralt, Nathaniel and Grey Warden no matter how different their characters, contexts or the worlds are.

As in every other medium, myths are used in video games specifically because of the freedom of fictional worlds of video games. The freedom to shape the environment and its inhabitants allow developers experiment with their own imagination and creativity. Unique creatures, mythical animals, magic reflected visually and exaggeration of effects are common characteristics of most videogames. New technological tools provide support in this flow of creativity, too.

Video game development takes inspiration from mythologies around the world to create portrayals of well-known characters as, for example, an image of a demon, and uses stories from different cultures to merge these views into one collective figure. However, most importantly, if we look at video games from the point of view of their adaptation of traditional storytelling motives, we can see that folklore has definitely seen a rebirth in contemporary digital media. In such games as *God of War series* or *Nioh* the adapted myths could be easily identified. Although in the first three God of War games, the events in action does not resemble any particular Greek myth, it is clear that the context, the surroundings, the characters (gods and giants) are pertinent to it. Similarly, *Nioh* it is strongly based on Japanese folklore, and follows historical and mythological narrative with the appearance of such common characters as Kappa, Nue etc ("r/Nioh", 2017)

Thereby, the player finds themselves in the midst of a myth, yet they are the driving force of the story, they are the one who interact with it and lives within it. They are reconstructing the myth via interacting with it.

Although in the examples mentioned we can observe two very distinct mythical systems, another narrative has become widely popular in both cinematography and game development industry. Norse mythology, as we have mentioned before, is used now in popular culture in the shape of films, series (*Marvel* Cinematic Universe), animations (*Valhalla*, 1986) and video games (*Jotun*, *Through the Woods*, *Hellblade: Senua's* Sacrifice and *God of War*, 2018). It is difficult to say what exactly appeals to the audience in the mythological context of ancient Scandinavia. In his interview the creative director of *God of War* (2018) Cory Barlog mentioned, that during the early stages of game development he and the team were considering setting the game in the context of other myths (e.g. Ancient Egypt). Nevertheless, they decided to set the

story in the Norse myth 'due to very special Scandinavian sense of humour, worldview, predetermined by the end of everything and everyone, *Ragnarök*, and humans – gods relationship, key characters of the myth' (Beyond!, 1:07:07-1:10:00). In the end, developers carried out significant research in order to gain deep understanding of Norse mythology and investigate possible stories for adaptation.

Here rises an issue of origin for mythological stories that we need to touch upon. For example, if we take Norse mythology, many different resources, translations, editions and oral legends serve as a basis for contemporary mythological studies.

It is a highly indicate subject as the researches have to distinguish variations from each other, determine the reason for differences, and identify possible foreign cultural influence on the legend. Therefore, it is very hard to call something the original source and the only true version of the story.

In the case of God of War, developers have done a phenomenal job in order to reconstruct the myth, retell ancient stories and adapt the setting to the technical and aesthetic need of the video game. The closer case study of the game and its approach to myth adaptation will be described in the next chapter.

3.3 Conclusions

Storytelling has always played an important role in human society. Since the emergence of first folklore stories, it was a way to share experience, to pass on generational wisdom, to order the chaotic and unknown world around. Myths that arose as a part of storytelling traditions governed the sacred side of human life, as well as provided values and guarded moral codes of the society. Four functions of myth, proposed by Joseph Campbell, reflect the main roles myths played in the society: a teacher (pedagogical function), a muse (metaphysical), a parent (social) and the axis mundi (cosmological). These functions are relevant for any culture around the world.

Another part that reflects relevance of myths to any of the world society are the common storyline patterns that could be traced in most human cultures. The character and story archetypes are repeated in ancient human tales as well as in the modern ones.

The ways of storytelling has certainly changed during the last decades due to the technological advancement of humanity. The development of elaborate computer-

based tools has broadened the horizons for creative thought, provoking the significant increase in the numbers of story creators. Nevertheless, old plots still find expression even in digital media, as humanity continues to enact, recreate and adapt myths to the modern life.

Adaptations are a very common storytelling devices that has been used extensively since the days the first stories emerged. From unconscious adaptation of real events, e.g. two neighbours asking a Jarl to solve an issue with the disappearance of farm animals, each telling their own version of the event, to deliberate reinterpretation of a literary work, e.g. *The Great Gatsby (2013),* adaptation has taken an important place in out storytelling traditions. It has become commonplace in interactive digital media just as well.

Video games development have seen light no more than 60 years ago, yet it has grown to be a massive entertainment industry with hundreds of products coming out every year. Video games continue the storytelling tradition and aim to share developers' creativity through interactive means. Many of them have turned to the adaptation means in order to appeal to the public, play on the existing stereotypes, others wish to call to the background knowledge and old mythological consciousness that any human being possess. We instantly recognise familiar motives in movies or videogames, and although sometimes it can influence the reception of film in a bad manner, e.g. a player could get bored knowing how the story will develop, it can also produce a massive success. Giving an old story new fresh perspective might attract audience and be very fitting in contemporary world context.

Video games allow the myth to be experienced in action. The player being the driving force of the story appears in the middle of the myth, shapes it, changes according to their choice and participates in the process of myth adaptation, too.

Today in the world of game development, Norse myth has become a very popular system to be adapted. It is received well by the wider audience and contributed to the appearance of many creative adaptations on the market.

Chapter 4

Case Study: God of War. Narrative.

4.1 Background and context

God of War (2018) is an award-winning action role-playing video game developed by Santa Monica Studios. It provides an excellent example of Norse myth adaptation in the sphere of interactive digital media. Despite being a continuation of the Greek myth-themed series, the game is drastically different from its predecessors in the sense of atmosphere, plot and even mechanics used. The first three games revolved around vengeance and debt, service to the gods and their inevitable murder by Kratos, the protagonist. Set in the Greek mythology context, the *God of War* franchise possessed a very diverse set of characters, plots and stories to build the narrative upon, e.g. Greek pantheon of gods, mythological or primordial creatures like Giants, Fates etc. Despite the rich and abundant context that has been already created for God of War universe, the developers were determined to give the series a fresh start, a reboot done in a creative and distinct way, set in the re-enacted world of Norse myth (GDC, 8:00-10:00). According to the team, it was an ambitious but very challenging task. Besides many technical alterations, connected to the exploration of the new platform (PS4), new engine or the decision to introduce such a complex and highly demanding means of in-game storytelling as no-cut camera, the responsibility of a 'franchise continuation' pushed the development process to a higher standard of work (Noclip, 1:30-16:00).

Figure 1. *Side-by-side comparison of Kratos in God of War 3 and God of War (2018) (r/Godofwar, Reddit)*

Whereas the whole idea of the first three games followed the protagonist, Kratos being aa vengeful Spartan, a 'killing machine', a demigod full of grief, rage and desire to kill, new God of War (2018) touches upon other topics, such as fatherhood, patience, lost identity and new beginning. Game developers, however, have not altered his nature for the needs of the game; they developed his character and built on his experience (GDC, 7:00-10:00).

In essence, the story is deals with the conscious choice of identity and acceptance of one's true nature (IGN, 2:00-8:00). Although the main quest of the game seems rather simple: to bring the ashes of the deceased mother to the 'highest peak in all realms', protagonists have to endure multiple crises in order to succeed in their journey. They get invaluable experience and progress simultaneously in both the story and their personal growth. Finally, at the very end, hidden truths will be revealed about themselves, as the game ends with an ambitious base for series continuation.

4.2 Heroes' journey in God of War

The narrative development of the game, as it could have already been noticed, reminds us of J. Campbell's *Hero's Journey,* a mythological pattern, seen both in ancient myths around the world and in modern storytelling (Campbell, 1968). Despite the originality of the plot development, three main stages of the *monomyth* pattern, i.e. 'call to adventure', 'initiation', 'return with experience' can be clearly singled out in the game.

According to Campbell, in these three stages there could be characterised 17 subparts. It is very individual for each story how these parts are represented whether all of them make it into the story, but the overall structure is usually preserved.

The first stage of the journey, *call to adventure*, includes:

1) Call to an adventure;
2) Refusal of the call;
3) Supernatural aid;
4) Crossing the threshold;
5) The belly of the whale.

The *God of War* (2018) begins with Kratos, a demigod by birth and Greek God of War in the past, and his young son Atreus mourning for their wife and mother. They still remain in their ordinary world: safe woods and familiar cabin; with the death of a family

member the world alters. They help her pass to the other side as they burn her body, and they are just about to embark on a journey to spread her ashes from 'the highest peak in all realms'. The death of Kratos's partner is his and his son's call to adventure. It triggers all the events that are about to come later in the game.

However, first, Kratos takes his son hunting. This is also closely related to the motives of initiation, a rite of passage, also expressed in Campbell's work (Campbell, 1991). This indicated a special time, when young boys had to prove their readiness for the adulthood. Atreus does not perform as well as Kratos wanted him to, so he refuses to take the boy into the adventure. It is a variation of the 'call refusal', although a journey still is to be undertaken.

As mysterious visitor suddenly appears at the door, he challenges Kratos to combat. Although at the time it is unknown to the player, but the visitor is one of the Norse gods, Baldur. He is looking for the last of the Jötnar in Midgard, and much later in the game it will be revealed that Faye, Atreus's mother was a Jötun, which makes him an heir of her blood. The fight with visitor leaves Kratos exhausted, but gives him a clear understanding that their cabin in the woods is not safe anymore. They have to answer to the call. The strager, not in the shape of adviser or mentor, but in the form of immediate danger forces both of the protagonists to embark on their journey. He is the threshold guardian, and defeating him means a journey start. Once Kratos and Atreus leave the magically protected forest they have been living in, they discover how much danger lies on their way, and find themselves 'in the belly of the whale'. Their old self is just about to disintegrate and release their deeper potential.

The next stage of the *hero's journey* is initiation. It consists of the following:

6) The road of trials;
7) The meeting with the goddess;
8) Woman as Temptress;
9) Atonement with the Parent;
10) Apotheosis;
11) The ultimate boon.

Despite the dangers the protagonists have to go through, they start their quest travelling through the mystic and unfriendly environment. On their journey, they encounter such essential to the story characters as Freya (the 'Goddess' that helps protagonists throughout the journey), Jormungandr, the World Serpent, dwarf brothers

Sindri and Brok. Kratos and Atreus are delayed from the completion of the task as they learn the location of the higher mountain, and what it takes to get there Later in the game, the main characters are confronted by the gods (Modi and Magni), who by Odin's will aim to kill them. This is their road of trials; it is necessary to bear these hardships in order to grow and transform.

Enduring near-death fights, the main characters see development and identity change; they experience unusual for them bonding, trust and responsibility. Kratos has to face temptation to reunite with his wife in the light of Alfheim, and he almost fails the task if not for his son, who saves his life (fig. 2). Atreus speaks up to his father, and in this action, as well as the mentioned gradual boding process, the boy was experiencing the 'atonement with the parent' stage. For Kratos this stage comes when he faces the vision of his father, Zeus in Helheim. This experience helps him to move on and accept his change and his past.
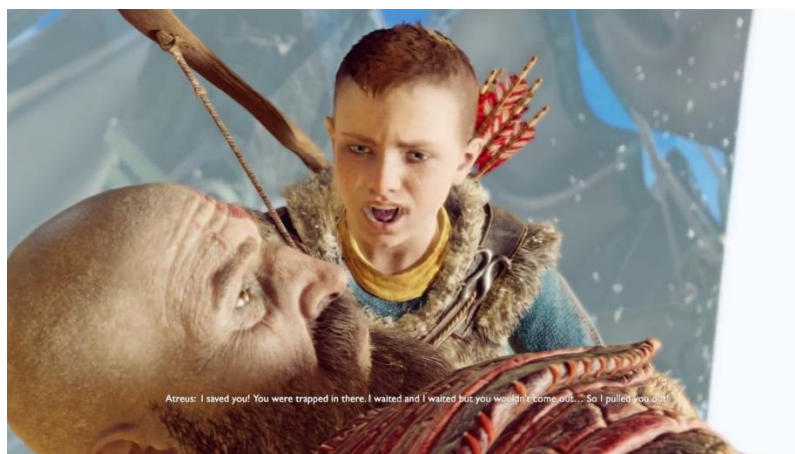

Figure 2. *Atreus pulling out his father from the light of Alfheim*

It is not that easy to determine which moment in the game could be considered an 'apotheosis' moment. For the Atreus it is more apparent: when he falls ill and it is discovered that his two beings, the human part and the god part are in conflict with each other, he hardly survives this experience thanks to Freya's magic and Kratos's commitment to the boy. Not only does the father enter Helheim, the realm of the dead to find an ingredient for the spell that could heal his son, but he also faces his past and finally admits that 'he is a monster, but only his own monster now'. He will not follow any other interest than his family's anymore. The transformation to a better or higher being is the primary idea of the 'apotheosis' stage.

Finally, passing through all the hardships and overcoming the dangers, Kratos and Atreus achieve their task and their ultimate boon. Although it was supposed to be the end of their journey, it immediately presents them and the player with new truths, reveals Atreus's true origin and hints at several major events in both his and his father's future life, e.g. the mural depicting Atreus holding a wounded man resembling Kratos in his arms (fig. 3). It concludes the story and at the same time sets up the context for the next game in the series.

Figure 3. *The mural in the last location of the game*

Finally, the last stage of a *hero's journey* consists of:

12) Refusal of the return;

13) Magic flight;

14) Rescue from without;

15) Crossing the return threshold;

16) Master of the two worlds;

17) Freedom to live.

It could be argued that this stage of the *monomyth* in least represented in the game. After Atreus and Kratos fulfil their task, not much is left to experience in the main storyline. The quest is over, and in the game of 2018 we are not directly shown the effect the journey had on the protagonists. The player might choose to explore the world further, to do side quests or collect lore pieces; however, if they follow an indication in Kratos's words in the very last cut scene and go back to the first location, a 'secret ending' (IGN, 12:00-13:20) would be presented to them. However, it is more

a start of a new cycle than the end of the old one; another unfriendly stranger appears at the door of the cabin, and it seems to be Thor, the god of thunder.

In conclusion, it could be said that as an example of modern interactive storytelling, *God of War* (2018) conveys the idea of Campbell's *monomyth* very well, and it indeed carries the model characteristic of mythical plots. From the examples discussed it could be seen that the overall structure of the main storyline corresponds to the mythical model of storytelling, preserving such elements as the image of the Goddess, who helps the hero, the portrayal of the first threshold passed, e.g. difference between the safe woods of the 'ordinary world', the woods, and hostile 'special', outer world. Nevertheless, the last stage seems to be omitted from the plot, possibly saving the results of the journey and experience gained as another story to tell in the future continuation of the series.

Thereby, on the grounds of the conducted analysis it is safe to assume that *God of War* (2018) as an illustrative example of interactive digital media is involved in contemporary myth making. The resemblance the game's narrative hold to the structure of *monomyth,* singled out by Campbell, allows us to call the studied game a representative of the modern myth.

Chapter 5

Case Study: God of War. Gods, Creatures and Enemies

We have looked at the example of *God of War* (2018) as a myth by itself, and now we would like to examine its features as a myth adaptation. This chapter outlines the differences and similarities images of such characters as Baldur, Jörmungandr and Valkyries in *God of War* (2018), and in the original myth, sourced in the *Elder* and *Younger Edda*s. Ultimately, we aim to compare the myth and its counterpart in the game to see whether it could be called an adaptation of the myth, or rather a myth-inspired story.

5.1 Comparative analysis: myth and the game.

In order to see how faithful to the source material game developers stayed, it would be of greater use to examine three different categories of mythical heroes: gods, creatures and enemies. The interaction with the player differs for each of them, yet such common features as possible cut-scene interaction allow us to structure the analysis in a coherent and uniform way.
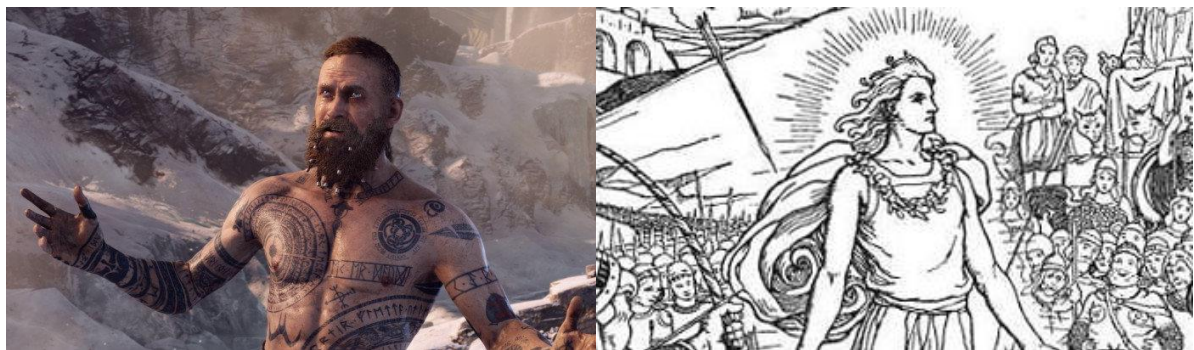
Gods: Baldur

Figure 4&5. *The portrayal of Baldur in the game and in myth (Smith).*

Baldr (or Baldur) is the god of light in Norse mythology and the second son of Frigg and Odin. He is the 'beloved god' and the fairest of all Æsir. He is also known to be a brave and honourable man. Most preserved legends, however, does not speak of any of his feat, but they concern his death, and the consequence of it, Fimbulvinter, a three-year long winter, after which the end of the world, Ragnarök comes (Sturluson, Larrington: *Gylfaginning*, p.77).

The legend that found its refection in both *Elder* and *Younger Edda* is the one that tells about Baldur's dreams (*Baldrs Draumar*) where he sees his death. The gods took counsel and decided that they should ask every living creature in the world to promise not to do harm to Baldur. His mother Frigg asked animals and plants, but she missed one plant, mistletoe, thinking 'it was too young to ask the oath of it' (Sturluson, Larrington: *Gylfaginning,* p.71). As a result, the trickster god Loki learns about it, and makes Baldur's blind brother Höðr shoot a mistletoe arrow at Baldur. It happened at the feast, when all gods where entertaining themselves with his newly acquired immortality. Baldur dies, and the gods grieve for him.

"*Then, when Baldr was fallen, words failed all the Æsir, and their hands likewise to lay hold of him*" (Sturluson, Larrington, 2014: p.72).

The first moment we see Baldur in the game, we are probably not able to recognise him. Some players, according to the interview (IGN, 18:30), have mistaken stranger at the doors for Loki, the trickster god. This version of Baldur differs significantly from its mythological counterpart; the visual image of him does not suggest this god being the prettiest and 'fairest of all Æsir'. A grim-looking man, he is covered with runic symbols which, as explained by Cory Barlog, the creative director, is the physical manifestation of his mother's spell (PlayStation, Part 2:3:00-5:00).

In reference to Baldur's mother and her image in the game, it should be stressed that the developers held to the theory of one common origin for Frigg and Freya (IGN, 40:30-51:00), and chose the image of the latter to be adapted as a collective representation of the goddess.

Baldur's background seems relatively close to the myth: he is Odin's son, a brother to Thor and uncle to Modi and Magni. Freya, his mother, put a spell on him to protect from any possible harm. However, differently from the myth, the consequences of Freya's decision are explored further in the game. The narrative suggests that complete invincibility influenced Baldur's mental health, and turned him against his mother. It is seen like a burden, a curse rather than a blessing.

Finally, the character of Baldur in the game depicts a rather unstable, angry and aggressive, deeply hurt and exhausted god suffering from his invulnerability. He seeks the ways to break the spell and get revenge on his mother for making his existence miserable, devoid of any feeling in the world.

We do not witness the casting of this spell in the game; however, Baldur's death is an essential stage of plot development. The spell Freya created breaks when he hits Atreus, who happened to have a piece of mistletoe arrow in his armour. Later, mortal Baldur dies from the hands of Kratos. Different to the myth, his brother does not play any part in his death. However, keeping in mind end-of-the-game reveal of Atreus being Loki, it is plausible to find another correlation with the original myth: Loki and a mistletoe arrow being the catalyst for Baldur's death. As it could be noticed form the dwarf brothers banter later, the world has changed after the player defeats Baldur. The Fimbulvinter is coming.

To conclude, it could be said that the game representation of Baldur is a result of an unusual interpretation of the myth, adjusted to the setting of the world. Baldur's background has remained truthful to the original source, as well as his mother's spell. However, the concept of invulnerability was developed much further than it described in any variation of the myth.

The differences mentioned certainly serve a purpose of reinterpretation of Norse gods that could be seen throughout the whole game: the Æsir specifically are presented as aggressive, selfish, terrible gods, who seek fight and destruction. Although it is true that Norse gods in the original myth are often depicted fighting, murdering and tricking people, *God of War* (2018) makes an extra effort to convey the idea of supreme beings having flaws and severe obsessions of their own.

We have looked into the portrayal of Baldur, the Æsir god and one of the main characters of the story. Now we would like to explore the way game developers dealt with less described characters in the myths and mythical creatures' adaptation to understand whether it allows more or less creative freedom.

Creatures: Jörmungandr.

Figure 8&9. *The portrayal of Jörmungardr in the game and in myth (Wikipedia)*

The comparison between two images of the World Serpent could be an interesting topic to discuss. In the myth, Jörmungandr is a terrible sea serpent, the spawn of Loki and giantess Angrboða. In the *Elder Edda* it is mentioned that Odin himself thrown the serpent into Midgard's ocean, where Jörmungandr grew and became so large he surrounded the Earth and was able to bit its own tail. The Serpent is also involved in the events of Ragnarök: he is to fight Thor, kill him and die from his hand (Sturluson, Larrington: *Gylfaginning*).

"*From the east comes Hrym | with shield held high;*
In giant-wrath | does the serpent writhe;"(Bellows, Völuspá: 50)

The World Serpent in the game is first encountered in the Lake of Nine. An enormous white snake, he emerges from the water and greets the protagonists without expressing any kind of obvious aggression. Atreus immediately mentions that "mother said he was friendly". Such a portrayal of the giant could be seen unusual to those who are familiar with the myths, because there Jörmungandr is only talked about as a vile beast that will produce massive destruction in Midgard and kill Thor.

The serpent remains passive through the most part of the game. Once the player rescues Mimir from Odin's trap, it becomes possible to speak to Jörmungandr. The player also learns from Freya and Mimir that the serpent appeared in the lake out of nowhere, and grew so large he encircles all Midgard. He once had a fight with Thor, when he was hit so hard that he fell through the time back before his own birth into the lake, and once will have such a battle again.

Lastly, it is described that Jörmungandr despises the Æsir, especially Thor and Odin, and even answers Atreus's call for help when Kratos and his son engage into combat with Baldur.

As it could be seen, game developers have certainly adapted the basic narrative of World's Serpent's story: he was cast off into Midgard, where he grew to battle Thor in Ragnarök, the basic model of event corresponds to its mythological counterpart. However, the negative focus on his persona was shifted to a slightly positive one: Jörmungandr in the game is presented as an ally, one of the last of the giants in all nine realms. The narrative urges the player to bond with him against the Æsir, who are usually spoken of in a negative key. Possibly, this manner of storytelling aims to question the way we usually think of gods, and to examine an old story from a new perspective.

Enemies: Valkyries.

Picture 6&7. *The portrayal of Valkyries in the game and in myth* (Parkes)

Now that we have investigated the ways game developers adapted gods and mythological creatures, we should look onto a mixed category of enemies, and Valkyries as an example. It is possible to interact with Valkyries: the player would usually talk to their spirit after the fight.

Valkyries, the "Choosers of the Slain" are the female servants of All-father Odin. They help him in his task of creating a great army of fearless men to fight along him during Ragnarök. Valkyries are usually described as beautiful and fierce shield maidens, riding winged horses to the battlefield to collect the bravest souls and take them to the great hall of Valhalla. Often in the myth, they could be of noble origin, e.g. the daughters of the king. They also sometimes appear as lovers of the mortal men.

> "*Hogni was the name of a king. His daughter was Sigrún; she was a Valkyrie and rode air and water; <…> Helgi was then at Logafjoll, and had fought with Hunding's sons; <…> There Sigrún found him, and ran to throw her arms about his neck, and kissed him*" (Bellows, *The Second Lay of Helgi Hundingsbane*: 4, 13).

In the game, however, Valkyries are depicted rather differently from their mythic counterparts. Despite having the same original function: to carry slain souls from the battlefield to Valhalla, the twisted versions of shield maidens that the protagonists encounter in hidden chambers are aggressive, non-human creatures. It is explained at the late stages of the game that Odin has corrupted the Valkyries but their elder one, Sigrún, managed to capture and chain them before they could do any harm by Odin's wish.

Each of the Valkyries in the game has a name corresponding with a real name of a Valkyrie mentioned in the myths, i.e. Göndul, Róta, Gunnr, Eir, Ölrun, Geirdriful, Kára, Hildr, Sigrún (Sturluson, Larrington: *Gylfaginning*). In *God of War,* Sigrún serves as the Queen of Valkyries – there is no evidence in the myths that this character was ever considered to be the queen of the shield maidens, yet she is one of the most known Valkyries and an important character of the *The Second Lay of Helgi Hundingsbane* story in the *Elder Edda*.

Each of the Valkyries in the game is given a description and a brief backstory. For example, Gunnr is spoken of as the Mistress of war, always "first on the scene of the battlefield". The myths, specifically in *Völuspá* in *Elder Edda* did mention Gunnr in the list of Valkyries (Bellows, *Völuspá*: 34). Her name literally means "battle", but there is no other story provided, so in adapting her image into the game the developers must have taken inspiration from the significance Valkyrie names bore.

Overall, it could be said that although the game remained faithful to the background functions of the Valkyries and their relation to the gods, their visuals have certainly undergone a drastic transformation, as well as their involvement in the plot. We suggest that such an alteration serves the purpose of creating an atmosphere of grim and corrupted world, where Odin's abuse of power and obsession for knowledge is slowly destroying the realms. It also serves the game design purposes to prolong player experience and present them with a true challenge they cannot beat at the early stages of progressing in level.

5.2 Conclusions

There is no doubt that adapting a myth is a very complex and uneasy task. Due to the existence of multiple variations of the same myth, it is hard to determine one specific source to borrow information from. Nevertheless, the developers of *God of War*, in our opinion, has shown a high level of competence in examining Norse legends, existing myths, traditions and rituals. They have managed to create a believable atmosphere of ancient Scandinavian culture not only visually, but also via audial means (music and sound effects). The precision with which the myths were transferred into interactive environment through characters and creatures and reinterpreted to fit the story better, allows us to say that *God of War* (2018) is beyond no doubt an excellent example of myth reconstruction and myth adaptation in the world of video games.

Chapter 6

Conclusion and future work

One of the main topics present research focused on is the notion of *monomyth* and its reflection in video games. Having discussed storytelling and its place in human life, we proceeded to the deeper analysis of myth, its definition, and functions in ancient and contemporary societies. It has been discovered that myth is still being re-enacted by our everyday rituals, festivities and superstitions.

We have looked into the model of '*hero's journey*' proposed by Joseph Campbell and examined a video game *God of War (*2018*)* on the basis of his theory. The study has shown that interactive digital media and more specifically video games follow the same storytelling structure as ancient myths do. Myth creation in video games manifests itself in the variety of multidimensional worlds and characters; nevertheless the inner structure could still be connected to Campbell's theory. Therefore, there is no doubt that even the most original plots still carry the legacy of the myths: the three-staged model of "call to an adventure-initiation-return".

Another question our research explored is the topic of adaptation and, more specifically, adaptation of myth in video games. We have found that although there are significant differences between, for example, literature to film adaptation, and literature to video game adaptation, and certain new challenges are there to be faced, it allows the content creator a greater creative freedom. The variety of tools that a person can use to contribute to the human tradition of storytelling opens the medium for a wider public, and thereby, encourages the process of adaptation and myth recreation.

Finally, in this study, we aimed to explore the duality of video games in action: them being a myth by recreating its original structure, and them adapting the myth, re-interpreting and re-enacting it. The case study of *God of War (*2018*)* has demonstrated that this duality indeed exists, and video games could be discussed both as a new separate product of myth reconstruction, i.e. a reinterpreted original story, or as a continuation of the mythological storytelling tradition, i.e. an adaptation of myth.

God of War (2018)*,* in our opinion, is an invaluable source for Norse myth adaptation analysis. This study has only touched upon the most prominent examples of myth adaptation, but there is certainly more to be examined. To better understand the theoretical groundings of this research and develop the idea further, future studies can

address the lore construction in the game, i.e. storytelling and myth making inside the game. It is an intriguing yet very complex issue to research.

We have seen on a single example how broad this topic is and how much could be explored in a single game. On the early stage of the development of the paper, we intended to include more Norse mythology based games into the analysis, e.g. *Jotun*, *Through the Woods* and *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*. However, due to time and scope limitations, it was decided that only one of the original list, *God of War* (2018) is to be studied in detail.

A recent announcement in December 2020 from the Ubisoft Montreal added a new example to the list, a continuation to the series *Assassin's Creed Valhalla*. It is still unclear whether the game will directly adapt the Norse myth and develop the storyline in accordance with the mythical events, or will it be just one of myth- or culture-inspired games, e.g. *The Elder Scrolls: Skyrim*. Nevertheless, it will certainly contribute to the diversity of Norse myth adaptations in the industry, and could serve a strong base for further analysis in the possible continuation of the present research.

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