

Teaching Norse Mythology in the Age of *God of War*

Finn Taylor, University of California, Berkeley

Works of fiction have long been a major gateway into the Middle Ages, and video games are becoming ever more prominent among younger generations as introductions to the past. The Viking Age in particular proves to be a highly popular source of both material and inspiration, a faze that is only growing stronger every year. One effect of its significant cultural impact on the modern era is an increase of interest in the Norse world among university students, which in turn is reflected in course enrollment in medieval Scandinavian topics. As an academic in the field of Old Norse, I have encountered many students in my courses who have signed up as a direct result of video games. In response, I have formed some ideas on how to negotiate the relationship between pop culture and academic study. This paper uses Santa Monica Studio’s *God of War* (2018) as a case study in exploring the current impact of Norse-inspired fantasy games on the global audience through both reenacting medieval narratives and reworking their messages to fit a modern context.

The *God of War* franchise began in 2005 with the release of the original *God of War* for PlayStation 2. The original series of seven games is set in the world of Greek mythology, and follows the Spartan soldier Kratos, who, tricked by Ares into killing his wife and daughter, sets out to exact revenge on the Olympic pantheon, eventually rising to replace Ares as the new God of War. Five years after the conclusion of the Greek cycle, the series was revived with the release of 2018’s *God of War*. Set many years after the events of the first series, Kratos now lives in exile in Midgard with his young son Atreus. The game follows father and son after the death of

Kratos’ second wife and Atreus’ mother, Faye, as they attempt to fulfill her final wish—to scatter her ashes from the highest peak in the Nine Realms. The quest takes them through several of these realms and against many Norse antagonists, monsters and gods alike. Along the way, Kratos attempts to overcome the ghosts of his past and his hypermasculine persona as a war god in order to bond with his son, while Atreus, grieving his mother and suddenly faced with the implications of godhood, struggles to come of age. As described by *God of War*’s creative director Cory Barlog, “This game is about Kratos teaching his son how to be a god, and his son teaching Kratos how to be human again” (Sliva 2016).

I

The world of Norse mythology according to *God of War* combines loyalty to the medieval sources with significant creative license. Beginning with traditional elements, the game is most “medieval” in its details: 1) its use of Old Norse, the language spoken in Scandinavia during the Viking and Middle Ages; 2) the world’s visual setting; and 3) the minor characters. The constant presence of Old Norse, both in the names of creatures and in the many runic inscriptions found throughout the world, provokes a sense of immersion, and signals a clear departure from our modern world into that of the game. Bearing in mind that too much of the foreign can disorient an audience, the game’s developers mediate the written Old Norse by making Kratos a stand-in for the



Two examples of runic inscriptions from *God of War*. **Top:** *Velkomnir jötnar*, “Welcome, giants,” is translated, albeit not literally, by Atreus in order to alert Kratos and the player about a nearby jötnar ruin. **Bottom:** *Ek sjá leynistigr*, “I see a secret path,” is left untranslated but provides a clue about a hidden treasure chest. This inscription displays the simplified Old Norse usually seen throughout the game — the grammatically correct sentence should read *ek sé leynistiga*.





The statue of Thor and the coils of the Midgard Serpent, Jormungandr, decorate the Lake of Nine.

audience—as a Greek, Kratos cannot read runes, and relies on Atreus, born and raised in Midgard, to verbally translate plot-relevant inscriptions as they progress through the world. The Old Norse language thus moves from the foreign to the exotic—an element of the world that can sometimes be accessed and sometimes cannot, maintaining its air of mystery to most players. And to the rest—the dedicated few—the game offers an opportunity to learn a little Old Norse, in turn mediated by the simplistic nature of the grammar used in the game’s inscriptions, which generally leaves most of the vocabulary in dictionary form which non-specialists can look up with ease (see images on page one).

Elements of the game’s physical setting also work to satisfy the expectations of players familiar with Norse mythology. One key example is the Lake of Nine, the game’s central hub containing the mechanism used to access the World Tree and travel between the Nine Realms. Prior to entering the Lake of Nine for the first time, the player has experienced a general sense of “Norseness” from the world and two anonymous gods, but have yet to encounter any highly recognizable hallmarks of the mythology. The lack of such landmarks in the first section of *God of War* helps ground the game in its central story of fatherhood without the distraction of identifiable Norse material, while simultaneously building up anticipation for these encounters.

The Lake of Nine satisfies this anticipation twice in quick succession. Upon rowing their boat into the lake, Kratos and Atreus first encounter a massive statue of Thor, recognizable by his hammer and Atreus’ dialogue naming him. The statue acknowledged, the characters move on and soon disturb a livelier denizen of the lake. It turns out that the Midgard Serpent has been sleeping beneath the waves this whole time. The awakening of Jormungandr is initially orchestrated as cause for alarm, as we have come to expect new creatures to be antagonistic—Kratos, the audience stand-in, prepares

himself for battle as the displaced waters recede. The Serpent, however, is not interested in a fight, and after a brief unintelligible dialogue, he, like the water, recedes into the background, his massive coils becoming a dramatic part of the landscape (above). The placement of both statue and serpent alerts the player that they are now entering the next phase of the narrative, in which the established creative story of the father-son pair will be integrated into the more familiar traditional mythology. Their presence at the game’s central hub, which is revisited many times during the course of the game, also serves as a constant reminder of the world’s Norse origins.

One final aspect of the game that retains strong qualities of the original texts are the supporting characters, perhaps best illustrated by the dwarf brothers Brok and Sindri. Like their medieval counterparts Brokkr and Sindri/Eitri, who are responsible for the creation of many powerful weapons and objects owned by the gods, *God of War*’s Brok and Sindri are highly skilled craftsmen, and their shops allow for armor and weapon upgrades; moreover, they are revealed to be the creators of Kratos’ main weapon, the Leviathan Axe. Like the Norse dwarves, they are highly competitive, and their alliance with Kratos is mostly driven by their need to out-compete each other by continuously enhancing his axe. Finally, they both offer the player side quests based directly on dwarf-related myths. Brok asks the player to help find his old friend Andvari, whose soul is ultimately trapped in his ring, while Sindri requests the player fetch a whetstone from Fafnir, soon revealed to have been transformed into a dragon.* The dwarves’ supporting roles as independent operatives do not require them to be altered to fit the new myth narrative—rather, their distance from the central premise allows them to closely follow the Brok and Sindri of the medieval sources. This in turn pushes them into double duty, appealing to the player versed in the mythological and legendary texts, while

* According to medieval sources, Andvari was a dwarf who created the ring Andvaranaut and enchanted it with the ability to locate gold. When Andvaranaut was stolen by Loki, Andvari put a curse on the ring so that it would bring misfortune to its owner. Loki subsequently gave it to the dwarf king Hreidmar, who was later murdered by his son Fafnir for his treasure. Fafnir, overcome by greed, transformed into a dragon and was later killed by Sigurd the Dragon-Slayer, who was incited to kill Fafnir by Fafnir’s brother Regin. This narrative is part of the core story of the *Saga of the Volsungs*, perhaps the best known of the Norse sagas, and served as the inspiration for Wagner’s Ring Cycle, Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, and many other notable modern works.

at the same time providing a crash course in Norse dwarves to the neophyte. That doesn't stop some improvisation with their personalities, however—Brok is both blue-skinned and very crass, while Sindri is a hopeless germophobe.

II

God of War departs from the medieval source material in its larger themes and characters—1) the adaptation of myths into video game format; 2) the deliberate subversion of major myths and characters; and 3) the reworking of narrative into holding modern relevance. Regarding format, rather than the story being told *to* you, in a video game you *are* a character within the story. This requires a new way of thinking about the narrative itself, much the same as a text-to-film adaptation, or film-to-TV. In the case of *God of War*, the 2018 game is both a reboot of an older video game series—a time-based remake of the same format—and a variation of Norse mythology—drawing both consciously and unconsciously from a long tradition of the telling and retelling of the myths. In much the same way as it both captures the spirit of the older games and takes new directions to match and further the current generation of games, *God of War* is in dialogue with previous iterations of the Norse world as well as creating its own vision, drawing from what has worked in the past in order to attract a known audience while also bringing something new to the table to avoid regurgitation and to set a new standard. Part of this process is the method by which the audience plays through the myths, not by observing but by actively discovering and taking part.

Take the story of Mimir—a deity who, according to the *Prose Edda* and other older texts, was decapitated during the war between the two races of gods and whose head was revived by Odin so that he might continue to access Mimir's wisdom. In a game setting, it's one thing to encounter a decapitated talking head and be informed of how such a situation came to be. But it's another to become involved in the actual process—to be the one, via Kratos, to decapitate a captive Mimir, bear his head (in this case) to Freya, and have her revive him in order to bring him on your journey, because he is the only entity who knows how to enter Jotunheim. This

shift requires the manipulation of the myth into a new narrative, but allows the player to bear witness to, and take responsibility for, Mimir's unfortunate situation.



The (de)evolution of Mimir

The greatest departure from the general mythological canon plays a similar role in enhancing the story itself, and comes in the form of the game's main antagonist—Baldr (below), who has seemingly gone insane from his inability to die or feel pain. The choice of Baldr as the enemy is emphasized by his characterization as a very capable fighter, more than a match for the titular God of War, Kratos. This is a rather exciting departure from Baldr's usual depiction in the medieval sources, which, in a composite, consists of a beautiful and beloved figure whose major claim to fame is the chain of consequences following his somewhat inglorious death. *God of War* maintains his bane as mistletoe—giving the player familiar with the mythology a clue to the identity of Loki, whose true name is only revealed at the end—as well as Baldr's death heralding the coming of Ragnarok, which conveniently leaves the door open for the upcoming sequel.

The choice of Baldr for the antagonistic role allows for a greater degree of creative license in forming his character. The god does not appear in many pop culture iterations of Norse mythology, which means that non-academic players have little to compare him to, as opposed to, for example, Thor. This opens the door for the game developers to create a character without having to take a previous version into consideration; in this way, Baldr is more of a blank slate than other gods. And the game makes good use of this freedom—Baldr's inability to feel pain reflects Kratos' own condition as



per the game's modern narrative. As a God of War with a traumatic past, Kratos has learned how to shut himself down emotionally, and advises Atreus early on to do the same, playing into the stereotype of traditional masculinity and the discouragement of emotional displays. However, Kratos' self-inflicted stoicism has become so second nature to him that he cannot connect with his own son—his initial treatment of Atreus is cold and borderline abusive, and even in rare moments of sensitivity, when he begins to reach out to lay a hand on the boy to comfort him, he ultimately withdraws. The highly emotional Atreus, meanwhile, is incapable of turning off, and instead begins to act out. The loss of his mother has removed the mediating factor between father and son, and if Kratos cannot forge a relationship with Atreus, he won't be able to ensure the boy's survival in a harsh world. Baldr, physically incapable of feeling pain, may thus be read as Kratos' main enemy both on a literal and figurative level—he is the warrior masculinity that Kratos must overcome for the sake of his son, while Atreus represents the emotional humanity at the other end of the spectrum.

III

Together, *God of War's* combination of loyalty to the medieval source material and its own brand of creative license allows for several types of interaction between the player and the mythological system. First, and most importantly, the game uses its inherent popular appeal to convey a meaningful and important message with high relevance in today's society. There's a reason why so many films, TV shows, and games continue to invoke the Viking Age—its imagery, themes, and characters draw huge crowds, and Santa Monica Studio's decision to reboot an already-beloved game series against a Norse backdrop made *God of War* an anticipated bestseller before it even hit the shelves. The developers have wielded this great power with confidence, choosing the universal topic of masculinity and fatherhood that has been recently prominent in the cultural mindset. Rather than supplying a concrete answer to the question of fatherhood, however, the game provides a space in which to explore the family dynamic, where the player bears witness to the narrative while simultaneously taking control of Kratos and, to a lesser degree, Atreus. Both characters thus become a hybrid, composed partly by the developers and partly by the players, who project themselves into the game as they, via Kratos, directly interact with the world of *God of War*. Although each player will experience the same narrative, the way in which they experience it is individual depending on that player's background, worldview, gaming style, and so on.

But what about studying and teaching Norse mythology and Old Norse topics against the backdrop of a game like *God of War*? I would argue that there are two other notable takeaways from this perspective. The first is the learning process itself, which builds on prior knowledge and familiarity with a topic. Immersion even in a creative adaptation of the mythology is still exposure to the mythology, and can help organize a student's understanding of the system of gods and narratives at play in the medieval sources. Similarly, on a larger scale, the process of reworking the old myths into new stories in *God of War* bears similarity to the medieval texts themselves. Our surviving sources for Norse mythology were written several generations after the conversion to

Christianity—a.k.a. several generations after the Norse religion was set aside, by writers who no longer believed in the gods or myths. At the same time, there was no method of universal communication like we have today with the internet—no way for the medieval writers to talk to one another, to verify their information, or to make sure that the myth narrative they were all writing was the same in every manuscript. As a result, these texts, each containing a different version of the myths, are inconsistent and often contradict one another, and are ultimately more reflective of the context in which they were written down (the post-conversion period) than the context in which they were first created (the pre-conversion pagan period). The modern adaptations of mythological material function the same way—compared to one another, they are similarly inconsistent, contradictory, and more reflective of a contemporary, rather than medieval, context. This universal process of adaptation and narrative evolution can be understood as a parallel linking the past and the present, creating a cornerstone for students approaching an otherwise esoteric past.

The second point is the simple fact that pop culture representations of the Norse world make people excited about the Middle Ages, and this excitement has the potential to lead them towards learning more about the history behind these games, shows, films, and so on. In part this is due to the inclusion of source-accurate elements in contemporary media, which may induce a detail-oriented player or viewer to seek out confirmation as to what is truth versus what is fiction. The myths themselves are a major factor in this process, visible in the amount of questions posed online by players about what is and is not accurate in the *God of War* pantheon. To me, however, one of the more remarkable phenomena coming out of the game's popularity is the uptick of interest in runes and Old Norse, which resulted in the formation of whole communities online devoted to translation of in-game inscriptions. Participants range from people who had never heard of Old Norse to those with years of experience helping newcomers navigate the runic alphabets and pointing them towards online dictionaries and grammars. One of the bigger projects of rune translation was the series of giants' shrines throughout the game world, which depict certain myths along with inscriptions explaining them. Through a large group effort around the globe, myself included, the shrines were transcribed, translated, and posted publicly in under a week, and are now available for anyone to access—one example of the ways in which the enthusiasm for Norse material spawned by *God of War* has extended far beyond the point at which the player puts down the controller.*

The New Yorker included *God of War* in its list of “Best Video Games of 2018,” stating that “the aesthetic is that of Homeric myth...but the narrative reflects more contemporary issues...In the age of the strongman, it's revitalizing to see a powerful man explore emotional vulnerability as a martial art” (Parkin 2018). I disagree with only one point—that the aesthetic isn't really that of Homeric myth anymore, but of Norse myth. And while historically there has been no love lost between academia and pop culture, there's no doubt that the fascination with the Norse world generated by and beyond *God of War* allows the world of the past to continue its existence in the present, while simultaneously inspiring what may very well be the next generation of medieval scholars.

* Check out the translations of the giants' shrines done by r/GodOfWarSecrets [here](#).