

# **Mytholudics**

**understanding games  
as/through myth**

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*Mytholudics*  
*Understanding Games As/Through Myth*

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# RESUMÉ

Denne afhandling skitserer en mytologisk forståelsesramme for, hvorledes spil skaber mening. Det centrale spørgsmål i afhandlingen er: Hvordan kan en mytologisk tilgang hjælpe os til at forstå, hvorledes spil skaber mening? Først udlægger jeg teorier om myter, og hvordan disse kan bruges i relation til spil og leg. Denne relation udtrykkes gennem en kredsløbsmodel, der viser, hvordan mytologi er indlejret i spilproduktion, og hvorledes dette påvirker spillene, samt hvordan man spiller og fortolker spil. Dette operationaliseres derefter til en metode til at analysere spil. Jeg har døbt min teori og analytiske tilgang *mytholudics*. Efter at have opstillet denne tilgang, anvender jeg derefter mytholudics i ti analyser af forskellige spil og spilserier, set fra to perspektiver: heroisme og monstrositet. Slutteligt reflekterer jeg over disse analyser og på mytholudics som tilgang til analyse.

Mytologi er her primært forstået ud fra to teoretiske perspektiver: Roland Barthes' teori som udlagt i *Mythologies* (1972/2009), samt Frogs (2015, 2021a) forståelse af mytologi i kulturnel praksis og diskurs fra et folkloreperspektiv. Barthes' tilgang etablerer myter som en form for udtryk frem for som et objekt, og dermed en gennemgående udtryksform i alle typer af medier og meningsskabelse. Denne udtryksforms primære karaktertræk er *naturalisation*, en naturalisering, hvorved vilkårigheden i mytens sekundære tegnsystem maskeres. Arbitrære relationer mellem tegn fremgår derved indlysende og naturlige. I Frogs tilgang til mytediskurs forstås mytologi som “constituted of signs that are emotionally invested by people within a society as models for knowing the world” (2021a, p. 161). Altså som bestående af tegn, som, i kraft af deres tillagte følelsesmæssige værdi, fungerer som skabeloner for en befolkningens gruppens verdensforståelse. Frog fremlægger en mytologisk diskursanalyse som metode med fokus på sammenligning af mytediskurser henover tid og på tværs af kulturer.

Barthes og Frog deler en fælles forståelse for mytologi som en særlig måde, hvormed forståelser af verden kommunikeres. Set fra dette perspektiv skal mytologi dermed ikke begrænses til nogen bestemt genre, et særligt medie eller en specifik kulturnel kontekst. Det kan inkludere så forskelligartede fænomener som systemer, regler, traditioner, adfærd, ritualer, fortællinger, karakterer, begivenheder, sociale roller, motiver, rumlige konfigurationer, og så videre. Det essentielle er, hvorledes disse elementer placerer sig i forhold til hinanden. Dette kontrasterer til visse forståelser af mytologi, der positionerer det som en narrativ genre, eller som en socioreligiøs funktion i 'primitive' samfund. Spil består af de samme forskelligartede elementer, placeret i sammenlignelige konfigurationer, og dermed fremhæver dette perspektiv de ellers skjulte parallelle mellem mytologi og spil. Derfor kan en mytologisk tilgang hjælpe os til at forstå spil som en organiserede struktur, hvori forskelligartede elementer sættes i relation til hinanden og dermed skaber mening.

For at udvikle denne rammeforståelse, argumenterer jeg for, at man skal analysere spil som og igennem myte. Spil som myte skal forstås som en måde at se spillet som en organiserede struktur, der fungerer på tilsvarende vis som mytologi. Bestanddele konstrueres og sættes i forbindelse med hinanden i spilverdenen, som spilleren så spiller i og fortolker på.

Med spil *igennem* myte forstås det, at spil skal ses som indlejret i kulturelle kontekster. Spiludviklingens kulturelle kontekst inddrager de mytologier, der påvirker spillets skabelse, mens spillerens kulturelle kontekst indvirker på, hvorledes de forholder sig til og interagerer med spillet og de mytologier, det kanaliserer.

Efter en redegørelse for teori og metode eksemplificerer jeg mytholudics-tilgangen ved at anvende den i ti analyser af individuelle spil og spilserier, inddelt i to kapitler med fem analyser i hver.

Det første af disse kapitler betragter spil gennem helten, defineret som en positiv mytegørelse af et individ. For at fremme en sammenligning og forståelse, redegør jeg for en række helte-typer, altså brede kategorier baseret på forskellige retorikker om heltemod. Disse er: *the hero-victim*, helte-offeret; *the hero-sceptic*, den skeptiske helt; *the preordained hero*, helten, der er blevet spået til at komme; og *the unsung hero*, den ukendte eller ikke-værdsatte helt. Spileksemplerne i denne kategori er *Call of Duty*-spilserien (2003–2022), *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011), *Assassin's Creed*-spilserien (2007–2022), *Heaven's Vault* (Inkle, 2019) og *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017).

Det andet kapitel betragter spil gennem monstret, bredt defineret som en form for negativ mytegørelse af et individ eller en skabning. Som med heltearketyperne, redegør jeg for en række forskellige monstertyper, baseret på, hvorfra deres monstrøsitet siges at stamme. Disse er: *the monster from within*, hvor kilden til monstrøsiteten stammer fra et individs eller et samfunds indre; *the monster from without*, hvor truslen fra monstret stammer udefra; *the artificial monster*, monstret, der er kunstigt skabt; og *the monster of nature*, monstret, der ses som en afart af den naturlige verden. Spileksemplerne i denne kategori er *Doom* (id Software, 1993), *Pokémon*-spilserien (Game Freak, 1996–2022), *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (Ninja Theory, 2017), *Ghost of Tsushima* (Sucker Punch Productions, 2020a) og *The Witcher*-spilserien (CD Projekt red, 2007–2016).

Slutteligt forener jeg disse to perspektiver i et kapitel, hvori jeg diskuterer helte- og monstertarketyperne, alle ti analyser og mytholudics-tilgangen generelt. Jeg argumenterer for, at min mytholudics-tilgang hjælper os til at forstå, hvordan spil skaber mening, fordi den fokuserer på de naturliggjorte og skjulte præmisser, der indgår i konstrueringen af spil som organiserende strukturer. Ved at analysere, hvad der ligger under disse organiserende strukturer, kan vi skitsere de mønstre, hvorudfra virtuelle verdener forstås, samt hvorledes de er påvirket af, indvirker på og relaterer sig til modeller for forståelse, mytologier, i den virkelige verden.

# ABSTRACT

This dissertation outlines a mythological framework for understanding how games produce meaning. The central question is: how does a mythological approach help to understand the way games make meaning? I first theorise mythology as it applies to games and play. This is expressed through a cycle showing how mythology is embedded into the production of games as well as how it impacts the playing and interpretation of games. This is then operationalised as a method for the analysis of games. I call my theorisation and analytical approach *mytholudics*. With this established, I apply mytholudics in ten analyses of individual games or game series, split into two lenses: heroism and monstrosity. Finally, I reflect on these analyses and on mytholudics as an approach.

Mythology here is understood primarily from two theoretical perspectives: Roland Barthes' theory outlined in *Mythologies* (1972/2009) and Frog's (2015, 2021a) understanding of mythology in cultural practice and discourse from a folklore studies perspective. The Barthesian approach establishes myth as a mode of expression rather than as an object, a mode that is therefore prevalent in all forms of media and meaning-making. This mode of expression has *naturalisation* as a key feature, by which the arbitrariness of second-order signification is masked. Otherwise arbitrary relations between things are made to seem obvious and natural. Frog's mythic discourse approach understands mythology as "constituted of signs that are emotionally invested by people within a society as models for knowing the world" (2021a, p. 161). Frog outlines mythic discourse analysis as a method which focuses on the comparison of mythic discourse over time and across cultures.

Barthes and Frog broadly share an understanding of mythology as a particular way of communicating an understanding of the world through discourse. From this perspective, mythology is not limited to any genre, medium or cultural context. It can include phenomena as diverse as systems, rules, customs, behaviours, rituals, stories, characters, events, social roles, motifs, spatial configurations, and so on. What is important is how these elements are placed in relation to one another. This stands in contrast to certain understandings of myth which may position it as a narrative genre or a socioreligious function of 'primitive' societies. Games consist of the same diverse elements arranged in comparable configurations, and so this perspective highlights the otherwise hidden parallels between mythology and games. Therefore, a mythological approach can help us to understand the game as an organising structure in which different and diverse elements are put into relation with one another in order to produce meaning.

To develop this framework, I argue for analysing games *as* and *through* myth. Games *as* myth means viewing the game as an organising structure that works analogously to mythology. Elements are constructed and put into relation with one another within a gameworld, which the player then plays in and interprets. Games *through* myth means seeing games as embedded within cultural contexts. The cultural context of development affects the mythologies that can be seen to influence the construction of the game, while the cultural context

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of the player affects how they relate to and interact with the game and the mythologies channelled through it.

With the theorisation and methodology laid out, I exemplify the mytholudic approach by applying it to ten analyses of individual games or game series, split into two chapters of five analyses each.

The first considers the games through the lens of heroism, defined as the positive mythologisation of an individual. To help with comparison and understanding, I outline a number of hero-types, broad categories based on different rhetorics of heroism. These include the *hero-victim*, the *hero-sceptic*, the *preordained hero* and the *unsung hero*. The examples analysed are the *Call of Duty* series (2003–2022), *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011), the *Assassin’s Creed* series (2007–2022), *Heaven’s Vault* (Inkle, 2019) and *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017).

The second considers the games through the lens of monstrosity, defined broadly as a form of negative mythologisation of an entity. Like with heroes, I outline a number of monster-types based on where their monstrosity is said to come from. These are the *monster from within*, the *monster from without*, the *artificial monster* and the *monster of nature*. The game examples are *Doom* (id Software, 1993a), the *Pokémon* series (Game Freak, 1996–2022), *Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice* (Ninja Theory, 2017), *Ghost of Tsushima* (Sucker Punch Productions, 2020a) and *The Witcher* series (CD Projekt Red, 2007–2016).

Finally, I synthesise these two lenses in a chapter reflecting on the hero- and monster-types, all ten analyses and the mytholudic approach in general. I argue that a mytholudic approach helps us to understand how games make meaning because it focuses on the naturalised and hidden premises that go into the construction of games as organising structures. By analysing the underpinnings of those organising structures, we can outline the model for understanding the world that is virtually instantiated and how they are influenced by, influence and relate to models for understanding the world—mythologies—in the real world.

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It's been an eventful few years. I began my PhD before most people had even heard of a coronavirus, let alone a novel one. The 'metaverse' was still something from 90s sci-fi. In my home country, the UK, we are onto the ~~third~~ fourth prime minister since I began. The second Elizabethan era has ended and the third Carolean begun. I wrote most of this before *Elden Ring* had been released. Whoever cursed me to live in interesting times, I don't thank you. But maybe interesting times make for interesting dissertations.

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

Myth, like history, always seems to be ending. Some greet this with delight. Look how far we've come! Despite its eternalising perspective, the "end of history" (Fukuyama, 1992) feels quite dated, a product of what was in retrospect a very, very odd era. Western liberal capitalist democracy—the system that Francis Fukuyama posits as the 'final form' of human governance—reached its zenith in the 1990s and early 2000s. The Berlin Wall had fallen and the Cold War ended. Growth seemed reliable—not too high so as feel unsustainable, though. War still existed, of course, but appeared to be on the decline overall. Humanity, it seemed, was on a steady march to the endgame, the end of history. Like many theories of human history, Fukuyama's presumes a linear progression. We advance from one epoch to the next, improving each time. Many view myth in the same way, as a defunct precursor to science. Back when we couldn't do science, we made up stuff about gods and tree spirits and devils to explain the weird things that go on in the world. Some lament this loss of myth: "only an immense void remains", writes the French philosopher Georges Bataille, "cherished yet wretched" (1994/2006, p. 48). But, like history, reports of the death of myth have been greatly exaggerated.

Bataille's broader point is right, though. "Night is also a sun", and the absence of myth is also a myth: the coldest, the surest, the only *true* myth" (1994/2006, p. 48). Calling this the *only* true myth is wrong, in my view, but it is certainly a dominant myth today. "We are accustomed to think of myths as the opposite of science", British philosopher Mary Midgley observes (2004/2011, p. 1). That science has become scientism, which posits science as "nothing less than a new and better ethic, a direct basis for morals, a distinctive set of secular values which would replace earlier ones supplied by religion" (Midgley, 2004/2011, p. 23). This is what Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence call the *myth of mythlessness*, "the unexamined belief that scientific culture has transcended mythical forms of thought" (1977/1988, p. 250).

That the absence of myth, mythlessness, or the supplanting of myth by science all become myths in themselves is testament to the tenacity of myth. The formulation of myth that I outline in this dissertation is not a thing, an object or a genre that can come to prominence and fade into irrelevancy, nor is it a defunct approach to empirical truth. It is a way, a form, a mode of creating, asserting and expressing meaning.

A mythical organization of the world (that is, the rules of understanding empirical realities as meaningful) is permanently present in culture. (Kołakowski, 1972/2001, pp. 2–3)

Myths are not lies. Nor are they detached stories. They are imaginative patterns, networks of powerful symbols that suggest particular ways of interpreting the world. They shape its meaning. (Midgley, 2004/2011, p. 1)

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Mythology is here approached as constituted of signs that are emotionally invested by people within a society as models for knowing the world. (Frog, 2021a, p. 161)

These definitions are not the same, but they orbit around something similar, seen in these words, one taken from each: “organisation”, “networks” and “models”. If I were to combine these, I could say that myth or mythology (I use the words mostly interchangeably) is the organisation of signs or symbols into networks that together constitute a model for understanding the world. We’ll work on the finer details of the understanding of myth in the next two chapters, but these ideas are crucial to orbit around: a form, a way, a mode of organising networks and models. In this way we also see the permanence of myth. With this formulation, myth is also a fundamental part of culture as such, changing and adapting to historical contingencies but never disappearing, such that the perceived absence of myth can be itself mythologised.

What do games have to do with this? In one sense, nothing in particular. Mythology as I have described it so far is not specific to any object, genre or medium and so anything can be a myth, including a game. Games are just one of many potential sites of mythic expression. No doubt this sense is partly true, and throughout my analyses I freely refer to and compare things with many non-game arenas: politics, advertisement, film, television, poetry, literature, religion and so on. Even if this were the whole story there would be a case for studying games in particular. It has become a little cliché to justify the study of games by referring to their prominence in culture and the size of the videogame market, but sometimes clichés emerge for a reason. Digital games do occupy an increasingly central position within many cultures (games more broadly have long been central<sup>1</sup>). Game designer Eric Zimmerman states boldly in a manifesto that “the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be defined by games” (2013). While Zimmerman’s manifesto has been criticised—as any polemical statement would be—the fact that it is not a totally outlandish proposition speaks to the cultural position of games. With less fire in his belly but still speaking to the prominence of games, game designer and researcher Ian Bogost writes that “videogames are already becoming a pervasive medium, one as interwoven with culture as writing and images” (2011, p. 7). Perhaps because of the pervasiveness of games combined with their relative novelty compared with most other media forms, games are increasingly being seen as the “canary in the coal mine of capital” (Joseph, 2021, p. 70) as well as of culture (Chess & Consalvo, 2022; Mortensen & Sihvonen, 2020). Games seem to prefigure many of the developments in wider society, politics and capitalism. Shira Chess and Mia Consalvo argue for example that the harassment campaign ‘GamerGate’ “provided a road map … regarding how to structure misinformation and gaming practices into social media presence” (2022, p. 161; see also Mortensen, 2018 for an authoritative

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<sup>1</sup> This is a vast topic, but for some works that cover the historical importance of nondigital games, see Roger Caillois’ *Man, Play, and Games* (1961/2001), Elliott M. Avedon and Brian Sutton-Smith’s *The Study of Games* (1971), Jon Peterson’s *Playing at the World* (2012) and a section in Stefano Gualeni and Ricardo Fassone’s forthcoming *Fictional Games* (2023) on folk games and ideology.

account of GamerGate). It may only be temporary, but at least for now games seem to be a key site for studying the forefront of cultural developments.

In another sense, games are a particularly interesting site for the study of contemporary mythology because we *play* them. This is unlike the media we usually compare games to—film, television, literature—and more in line with things we normally wouldn’t group games with: playing an instrument, playing in a playground, playing with my cat, playing with my Excel spreadsheet to get it to do what I want it to. This is analogous to the core ‘verbs’ of literature and film. We read novels just as we read an IKEA instruction manual, people’s faces, train station announcements. We watch films just as we watch sporting events or for the rice to start boiling. But play seems to be different, or at least particular, in its performativity and bidirectionality. Play seems to be both a way of engaging with something and interpreting it *and* changing and appropriating it in real time. While the words in a novel will always be in the same order, games can be different every time you play them, while still being called the same game. Actually, in this sense, maybe *play*, not games, should be the focus. As play scholar Miguel Sicart argues, “like in the old fable, we are the fools looking at the finger when someone points at the moon. Games are the finger; play is the moon” (2014, p. 2). Why not shoot for the moon? Play for Sicart is “a way of being in the world, like languages, thought, faith, reason, and myth” (2014, p. 3). But I would not separate play and myth. For me, games offer a fascinating site in which mythology informs and runs *through* a unique combination of phenomena: play, worlds, simulations and narratives. Nowhere else than in games do all of these converge. The way myth binds these all together is what makes a game a game: disparate elements orbiting some central gameness.

This brings me to my title. I usually try to avoid noncommittal titles involving parenthetical modifications to words and slashes and so on, but here I have to admit defeat. Understanding games *as/through* myth gets to the simultaneous duality of myth and the way that it binds the parts of a game together. A game is in itself a kind of mythology, or a system of myths; a game is the instantiation of a particular model for understanding the world. We know when we enter a game that things work differently there, and we accept that as a precondition for play. Our way of knowing things in a game is different to real life. The same things can have different meanings and different relations. In real life, jumping on a flagpole and sliding down it is a perhaps impressive but slightly weird and probably inconsequential thing to do. In *Super Mario Bros.* (Nintendo Creative Department, 1985) this act has a very different, singular, fixed meaning: the triumphant completion of a level. We don’t question this because that’s just how things work in the world of *Mario*. But the way in which the game-as-myth is constructed is invariably influenced by the osmosis of mythologies from outside the game into it. Simply put, we don’t create things in a vacuum. *As/through* highlights both of these processes. On the one hand, the lineage of influences. We can trace across societies and over time the models of understanding the world and things in it that have made their way into the game. On the other, it is also about taking the game for what it is, treating it as a world in its own right.

Defining ‘games’ is seen as something of an impossible task in game studies, ironically. But, as philosopher and games scholar Jonne Arjoranta argues, we need to, because definitions are above all “tools for analysis or persuasion. They help us understand the world or

convince others” (2019, p. 118). It is in this spirit that I make my attempt at defining ‘games’, a definition that (hopefully) is helpful in the context of this framework:

*Games are models for structuring play that instantiate real, historical or speculative models for understanding the world, which may be or include mythologies.*

Play is central to games as organising structures, and I focus on how those structures are fertile ground for myth. How is play *weaved into* the gameworld, such that the way of being in that gameworld feels in some way natural? How does the way we play seem to justify the way the gameworld works and vice versa? I am influenced here by philosopher C. Thi Nguyen’s (Nguyen, 2019a, 2019b, 2020) theorisation of play, games and agency. Nguyen emphasises that games have “a *prescriptive frame*”, something that “games share with traditional artworks” (2020, p. 121). “Structured games are ways to inscribe and communicate agency. They are vessels for transmitting agential modes”, he argues (2020, p. 98). There is ambiguity and bidirectionality in this agency though: playing games and negotiating the prescriptive frame “helps us assert our own values and interests against the pull of the temporary agencies” (2020, p. 221). In this we glimpse a part of what play scholar Brian Sutton-Smith (1997) calls the ambiguity of play. Play seems to do many things and can be theorised in any number of ways. Often simultaneously. Is play to games as reading is to novels? The problem is not straightforward. As we shall see, where there is uncertainty and ambiguity, myth thrives.

For me, the ambiguity of play and how it relates to and is a part of the game as an organising structure is a large part of what makes games interesting from the perspective of mythology. And I hope to show that approaching games as/through myth also helps us to better understand games. *Mytholudics* is the analytical approach I have developed to this end. Based on my understanding of what myth is, mytholudics describes how I go about identifying and analysing mythologies in games.

## 1.1 Research questions

The goal of this dissertation is to outline a method for analysing games as/through myth, which I call mytholudics. I contend that games can be better understood by approaching them in this way, and can be better situated within contemporary culture as well as a part of tradition. My central question is a rephrasing of this contention:

*How does a mythological approach help to understand the way games make meaning?*

In answering this central question, a number of other questions arise:

1. How does a mythological approach consider games?
2. What is the role of play in games and mythology?
3. How is a mythological approach applied to the analysis of a game?
4. How is a mythological approach fruitful in synthesising the analyses of multiple games?

The first two I aim to answer in the theoretical chapter ‘2 What is Myth?’. What do I mean by myth? How do games then figure into that understanding? And how does play relate to games, meaning-making and myth? The latter two I aim to answer by way of ten example analyses divided into two lenses, heroism and monstrosity, demonstrating how a mythological approach to games deals with both microscopic and telescopic analysis.

## 1.2 Previous research into myth and games

There are many, many frameworks for mythological analysis, but so far none tailored to games. This does not mean that existing mythological approaches are useless for the study of games. Rather, for the reasons outlined previously, I believe that games are a particular site for inquiry that benefit from an approach that centres play and games. As I have found over the course of this project, foregrounding the ergodicity (Aarseth, 1997), nonlinearity, performativity and virtuality of games also reconfigures how one thinks of myth. As an unexpected (to me) result, my approach has become defined in part by folklorists, who in recent decades have focused less on stories and single, authoritative sources, and more on the fractured, fragmentary and sometimes incoherent whirl of stories, practices, artworks, superstitions, beliefs, customs, rituals, rites, events and symbols that make up folklore. Games and gameworlds are in this way a lot like folklore. But folklore studies, while dealing sometimes with play and games, also does not foreground them. That is what I hope my approach can add. Scholarship on myth and games does exist. I delve into that scholarship throughout this dissertation, but here I will broadly summarise the state of the field as I see it and argue for why my approach is both novel and useful.

Probably the most prominent, explicit use of a mythological approach in game studies is Joseph Campbell’s (1949/2008) Hero’s Journey, or monomyth. The monomyth is an archetypal approach that contends that there are universal psychological models, from which emerge a universal narrative structure that Campbell outlines. Campbell’s monomyth has enjoyed enormous success, becoming prominent in guides for writing in film, television and games. The monomyth and Campbell’s argumentation have faced very strong criticism from academics—particularly folklorists and anthropologists. Despite this, most uses of the Hero’s Journey in games scholarship are broadly uncritical, accepting the premises of Campbell’s structure and applying it to games or observing how particular games fulfil the steps of the structure (e.g., Buchanan-Oliver & Seo, 2012; Cassar, 2013; Chun, 2021; Cirilla, 2020; Elam, 2020; Galanina & Vetushevskiy, 2018; Guyker, 2014; Noimann & Serkin, 2020; Pugh, 2018; Stobart, 2016; Vallikatt, 2014; Yoon, 2021). Often, the valid counterarguments to Campbell’s work are not even engaged with at all. This is not to say there is no Campbell-sceptic work in game studies (such as Ensslin & Goorimoortee, 2020; Jennings, 2022; Storey & Storey, 2020; and I would add B. J. M. Horn, 2021, whose questing model is based partly on Campbell but not without productive engagement with criticism), just that these are, so far, in the minority. That these more critical pieces tend to be more recent is promising though.

## 1 Introduction

Archetypal theories of myth, stemming primarily from Carl Jung's work on which Campbell's monomyth is based, also find widespread purchase within game studies (e.g., Bean, 2019; Beltrán, 2012; Ip, 2011; L. Murray & Maher, 2011; Rusch, 2018; Savett, 2014; Schafer, 2016). These studies approach the subject in a variety of ways, including using archetypes to compare between games, advocating for better game design by use of archetypes, and a focus on games as a space for the psyche to play with archetypes. Archetypes are not necessarily incompatible with my approach, but rather answer a different question: namely, where do myths come from psychologically? The questions I ask have to do with discourse: how do myths suffuse through society and over time, and how do games factor into that?

J. R. R. Tolkien's concepts of *mythopoeia* and *subcreation* are also relatively popular approaches in game studies due to their focus on worldbuilding. Alicia Fox-Lenz summarises that mythopoeia "imitates the creation of real-world mythology through an author or small group of collaborators in a short period of time instead of a cultural group through centuries of oral tradition" (2020, p. 22). Tolkien's own body of work exemplifies mythopoeia, in which stories seem to emerge as part of a wider body of worldbuilding that includes history, geography, linguistics, cosmogeny and so on. Subcreation is closely related. Rather than a 'suspension of disbelief', Tolkien argues that successful storytellers create a "Secondary World" which, if internally consistent and compelling, maintains the reader's "Secondary Belief": "inside it, what he relates is 'true': it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside" (1947/2008, p. 52). A number of works relate mythopoeia to games by analysing this holistic worldbuilding and considering how play relates to and perhaps powerfully fosters Secondary Belief (e.g., Cirilla & Rone, 2020; Konzack, 2006; Wallin, 2007; Wolf, 2012, 2018). In particular, I use Tolkien to discuss what I call *emulated* myth, the mimicking of mythological development that takes place over time and across societies in fictional work. Since Tolkien's focus was on building what feels like a genuine, living world with a long history, principles of mythopoeia are useful to consider when analysing worldbuilding in games.

Most other approaches to myth in games are a little scattered. Many use myth or mythology as a term for a genre of sacred or transcendent stories or cosmologies (e.g., Andreen, 2014; Cragoe, 2016; Krzywinska, 2006; Martín Junquera & Molina Moreno, 2018; Stang, 2021; Vallikatt, 2014). In some other cases, 'myth' is evoked as a term but never defined or theorised (e.g., Bosman, 2016; Gallagher et al., 2017; O'Donnell, 2015). These studies are useful and insightful, but I argue that an understanding of myth as a genre or kind of story is lacking, particularly if it is to be applied to games.

As of yet, no frameworks of mythology have been developed specifically for games to my knowledge. So far, existing frameworks have been applied to games instead. A recently funded project, 'Myth and Ideology in Contemporary Video Games (LUDO-MYTHOLOGIES)', led by Victor Navarro-Remesal and Antonio José Planells (see Navarro-Remesal & Planells, 2022) also aims at this gap (indeed, their title *Ludomythologies* is the reverse of my *Mytholudics!*). This project is in the very early stages and as such could not inform my project. Nor have I been able to engage critically with it. So far, Navarro-Remesal and Planells' theorisation of mythology seems to be quite different from mine, focusing more on myths as stories. They write:

The main hypothesis of the project is that myths, both from a transcendent perspective (*myths in the present*) and from an immanent one (*myths of the present*), have in games a space for ideological and narrative development that helps in understanding contemporary society. We aim to show not only the validity of myths even in the most contemporary forms of culture, but also the constant creation of new mythical structures to make meaning from the world. (2022, p. 8)

Their different theorisation of myth means that my framework and theirs can happily and critically coexist. This can only strengthen overall scholarship on myth and games and I look forward to seeing how the Ludomythologies project develops.

## 1.3 Summary of chapters

The first chapter, ‘2 What is Myth?’, outlines some of the key prior theorisations of myth. The chapter begins with a description of the term *myth* itself, its etymology and why there are so many different, often contradictory definitions. Following that, I outline a number of the most prominent, major strands of myth theorisation: myth as genre, archetypes, explanation, structure and discourse. To exemplify how each theorisation may be used, I provide three brief examples for each: the approach as applied to the *Odyssey*, an element of popular culture, and *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017).

With these understandings laid out, in ‘3 Towards Mytholudics’ I outline my own approach to myth and mythology, based primarily on Roland Barthes (1972/2009) and folkloric approaches (Frog, 2021a). I introduce the *mytholudic cycle*, a visualisation of how I see mythology as permeating across societies and through time with the metaphors of *ossification* and *fossilisation* to show how mythologies crystallise in society and build off of one another. Based on this, I describe *mytholudics* as my approach to games as/through myth.

In ‘4 Methods’, I show how I operationalise mytholudics. How does a mytholudic analysis proceed in practice? The core of this operationalisation is Frog’s *mythic discourse analysis* (2015, 2021a) which provides the key units of analysis such as *integers*, *motifs*, *partials* and *themes*, as well as a method and markup language for showing the relations between units and the analysis of them as a part of discourse across cultures and over time. Frog’s method is developed for folklore studies and has in particular been applied to Old Norse and Finno-Karelian mythology. Frog notes that the method can be attuned to more or less any context, including modern (e.g., Frog, 2014). To help with this calibration, I draw on Barthes’ *Mythologies* (1972/2009) because of his focus on mythologies in modern popular culture. Finally, I describe my method of analysis as hermeneutic and outline what a hermeneutic approach to games entails. I also describe how the following analyses are to be structured.

With ‘5 Heroes’, I move on to the first of two core analytical chapters. This centres on heroism as a lens with which a mytholudic analysis can be narrowed and focused. Collating positions in philosophy and folklore studies, I consider heroism to be the positive mythologisation of the individual. I begin the chapter with a literature review of heroism, outlining some of the main strands of heroism research. These strands include Homeric and Socratic

heroes, Rousseauian heroism, Campbell's hero of the Hero's Journey, the notion of *heavy heroes*, and recent psychological and sociological theorisations of heroism. I conclude this section with my working understanding of heroism. Next, I outline four *hero-types*, describing four enduring, widespread ways in which hero constructions have converged. These are the *hero-victim*, the *hero-sceptic*, the *preordained hero* and the *unsung hero*. These are not intended to form a typology of heroism, but heuristic conglomerations of heroification with which different examples can be compared. I then move on to my analytical examples: the *Call of Duty* series (2003–2022), *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011), the *Assassin's Creed* series (2007–2022), *Heaven's Vault* (Inkle, 2019) and *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017). I apply a mytholudic approach to each of these, focusing on the mythologies of heroism the games display. I conclude the chapter with a discussion that compares and contrasts these analyses, reflecting also on mytholudics as an approach.

The second core analytical chapter is '6 Monsters', which proceeds roughly symmetrically to '5 Heroes'. Here, monstrosity is the lens through which my mytholudic analyses will be directed. The monster is in some ways the opposite of the hero here, representing the negative mythologisation of an individual, against whom the hero is very often pitted. I begin by outlining prominent theories of monstrosity, centring on notions of difference, othering, category crisis and abjection (Kristeva, 1982). I consider also the relationship between monstrosity and morality. I then move on to how monstrosity in games specifically has been theorised, focusing on their computational nature and the ludic aspect of games. I then outline four monster-types: the *monster from within*, the *monster from without*, the *artificial monster* and the *monster of nature*. With these as tools, I move on to the five analyses: *Doom* (id Software, 1993a), the *Pokémon* series (Game Freak, 1996–2022), *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (Ninja Theory, 2017), *Ghost of Tsushima* (Sucker Punch Productions, 2020a) and *The Witcher* series (CD Projekt Red, 2007–2016). I conclude by comparing and contrasting the analyses and reflecting on the application of mytholudics to monstrosity.

Following the core analytical chapters is a synthetic chapter, '7 Reflections on Heroes, Monsters and Mytholudics'. Here, I zoom further out and compare the application of mytholudics to both lenses. I reflect on the differences in how my mythological approach led me to theorising monstrosity and heroism and the implications of that. For example, noting that the hero-types are not reversible poles, while the monster-types are. I discuss how both are discursive categories and consider the similarities and differences in how mythologies of heroism and monstrosity emerge in games. I also reflect on mytholudics more broadly and the implications of the virtuality of the gameworld for myth.

Finally, I conclude the dissertation. I offer some final reflections and concluding remarks, as well as a brief summary of the arguments presented, and suggestions and speculation for possible applications of mytholudics and future work that could build from it.

# 2 WHAT IS MYTH?

This dissertation hinges on what I mean by ‘myth’. That poses quite a problem, because myth is a term with several thousand years of use, in all academic disciplines as well as in colloquial speech, art, fiction and so on. To fully disentangle this history would consume the entire work (and more). That would be worthwhile, but would not help with the understanding of games. Here, then, I outline some of the most prominent understandings of myth, summarised and grouped together into what I see as the broad themes that connect them. With these as context, I then move on to a more direct treatment of my understanding of myth and how it relates to other frameworks.

In summarising the most influential uses of myth, I am particularly indebted to two articles: ‘True or False? Towards an Understanding of the Word “Myth” and its Meanings’ by Tony Ulliyatt (2007) and ‘Myth’ by Frog (2018). Rather than listing countless definitions, I group them based on what *kind* of thing they see ‘myth’ as, and what the term is therefore useful for analytically. I go into more detail on one or more key thinkers within each ‘group’ but acknowledge that any such grouping means sanding down the edges and reducing important differences between individual theorists, as well as missing out on many other theorists of myth within those traditions.

To demonstrate the different perspectives each approach has, I use three kinds of example for each category of mythological framework. First I use the *Odyssey* to demonstrate how each approach views a particular story, one which, at least in the West, is perhaps one of the first things that one thinks of when the term ‘myth’ is used. Second, I use examples from everyday life and ‘popular culture’. The term ‘popular culture’ is no doubt problematic; with these examples I really mean an example of the kind Barthes may have tackled in *Mythologies*. That is, not the looming, prestigious, canonised works of literature, but events, practices, objects and media that ordinary people encounter day-to-day. Finally, I use *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017) to examine how each understanding might interpret a digital game. This is not to say that games are in some way separate from everyday life or the problematic notion of ‘popular culture’, rather that games (and in particular digital games, understandably) were not the subject of Barthes’ analyses, but they are the focus of mine, and so it is useful to single them out. Before that, however, a brief overview of the term ‘myth’ as a whole is important for context.

## The term *myth*

Frog begins by observing that “the concept of myth has emerged as a fundamental frame of reference for Western thinking about the world and about how people in different cultures structure their experiences of the world” (2018, p. 1). It finds purchase in all fields of study—Frog names folklore studies, philology, political science and consumer culture theory (2018, p. 1) but we can also see its use in fields not at all to do with the study of culture, such as the natural sciences, in which the term is frequently deployed in the sense of a commonly-

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accepted but incorrect assumption, debunked by the scientific method. As a result, Frog remarks that “discussions of myth are fragmented, not only in the present but also in the past” (2018, p. 2). This is in part because the study of mythology “never took root as an independent discipline with institutional status” (Frog, 2018, p. 2). There are very few mythology departments in universities, very few dedicated degrees in mythology. Instead, approaches to mythology are predominantly *from* another preexisting field *to* or *with* myth. We see psychoanalytic approaches to myth, semiotic, sociological, historical, folkloric, and so on.<sup>2</sup> Frog stresses that this fragmentary nature means that one must develop a self-reflective, self-critical understanding of myth:

The challenge to the humanities presented by myth is to develop a reflexive awareness of the term and concept, both in order to refine it as an analytical tool and also to recognize ways in which the worldview we have inherited has structured and limited our thinking. (2018, p. 2)

With this in mind, the present section focuses on developing that awareness of the term and the concept as it is used in a number of significant ways.

We might begin with etymology, the “obvious (but not, as it turns out, the simplest) place to begin our exploration” (Ulliyatt, 2007, p. 4). The furthest the term has been traced back to is the ancient Greek μῦθος, *mýthos*, though it may be pre-Greek (Harper, n.d.-b). A common misconception is that in ancient Greek this word meant ‘story’ (e.g., Berger, 2013, p. 2; Frog, 2018, p. 9; Leeming, 2018, p. 14), but this is misleading. Rather, *mythos* was a contrast to *logos* and encompassed speech, thought, discourse, conversation, story, and more (Balinisteanu, 2018; Harper, n.d.-b). Besides, even for the ancient Greeks “the meanings and values attached to *mythos* and *logos* remained unstable and contested”, as Bruce Lincoln remarks, describing the battle over which of the two styles of discourse would be granted authority and the higher truth value in ancient Greek society (1999, p. 18). Ulliyatt is certainly correct to say that this does not simplify things much. For Ulliyatt, further complication arrives in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century when ‘myth’ enters English via the French *mythe*.<sup>3</sup> At this point it was used patronisingly or disparagingly to talk about cultures seen as ‘primitive’ or ‘inferior’, “an antonym for anything that was not ‘real’” (Ulliyatt, 2007, p. 6). Frog observes that this was

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<sup>2</sup> This is not unlike the study of games. Although there has been a concerted effort to establish Game Studies as a field unto itself since at least the early 2000s (Aarseth, 2001c), it is still too early to tell if this is ultimately successful. Of course, I write this as a member of the Center for Digital Play (formerly the Center for Computer Game Studies) at the IT University of Copenhagen, where a full master’s programme in either Games Design and Theory or Games Technology is offered. However, games programmes around the world often (though not always) gravitate towards or centre on the *development* of games, and it is still the case that a great deal of games research is produced by scholars who are institutionally situated in non-games-specific departments, such as media studies, literary studies, psychology, history, computer science and so on. That is not to say that is a problem, however, just that it means approaches to and understandings of games are a little more fragmentary, similarly to myth studies. (For more on game studies as a field unto itself, see: Aarseth, 2014, 2017, 2021; Aarseth & Mortensen, 2021; Deterding, 2017; Mäyrä, 2022; Mäyrä & Sotamaa, 2017; Mortensen et al., 2018.)

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, ‘mythology’ is attested in English much earlier than ‘myth’, appearing in John Lydgate’s early 15<sup>th</sup> century poem *Troy Book* (1420/1998, l. 2487).

“when the hegemonic Western identity was Christian: the gospel was truth, in relation to which all other religions had myths” (2018, p. 7).

In a similar vein, and linking back to the etymology, Ulliyatt also draws attention to an introductory chapter written by historian of religion Mircea Eliade, who remarks that “all the definitions [of myth] have one thing in common: they are based on Greek mythology” (1992, p. 3). Particularly among Western writers, there is likely undue emphasis given to or inspiration drawn from mythologies that are closer to home—especially those such as Greek mythology which for centuries accrued immense academic and cultural capital at the expense of other (sometimes intentionally suppressed) traditions. It is easy to develop an understanding of myth based solely on Greek mythology and then assume that every other mythology follows the same rules and structures. For example, we tend to think of there as being a Norse pantheon that functions in essentially the same way as the Greek, but the idea that such a pantheon existed at all within the contemporary Norse societies has been challenged (Gunnell, 2015). More broadly, Ulliyatt observes that a “further problem seems to lie in how a contemporary scholar intends to project his idea of *myths* backward into an ancient culture to achieve an authentic contextualisation of their meaning” (2007, p. 14). We can form understandings which we impose on the subject matter, and tautologically use it as evidence for the understanding. This also recalls Frog’s warning that “when myths are defined as stories, we may see stories where there are none” (2018, p. 10). Against all of these issues, we must be self-reflective of where our understanding of the term ‘myth’ comes from and in what way we are using it.

With the history, use and problems of myth laid out, I now turn to a brief overview of the major different ways in which myth has been understood.

## 2.1 Myth as text type or genre

One of the most prominent and enduring understandings of myth is as a genre—usually a genre of narrative. *Myth is a type of story*. All myths are stories, but not all stories are myths. Eliade, one of myth’s most well-known theorists, put forward an oft-repeated understanding along these lines. “The myth relates a sacred history”, claims Eliade (1959/1987, p. 95). Myth is a type of story with a particular subject matter. Similarly, Arthur Asa Berger, another prominent scholar of myth, introduces his book as such: “I will be focusing on the cultural, psychological and social meanings of myths as narratives and the way these narratives inform so much of our lives” (2013, p. 3), alongside, for example, fairy tales as a different kind of narrative (2013, pp. 7–9). Within this *myth as text type* understanding, different strands also emerge. Essentially, these are different arguments for what should constitute the narrative genre of myth.

For Eliade, as we have seen, myth is a particular kind of religious narrative. More specifically, myths relate events that “took place at the beginning of time, *ab initio*”, featuring “what the gods or the semidivine beings did”, “*ab origine*” and “*illo tempore*”—in a mythic, originary time (1959/1987, p. 95). As a result, Eliade says, “once told, that is, revealed, the myth becomes apodictic truth; it establishes a truth that is absolute” (1959/1987, p. 95). For these reasons, myths for Eliade are always sacred, and always speak of creation, of the origin

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of something (the world, culture, a people, a god, etc.). So, a myth is a religious narrative that describes the origin of a particular part of a religious system: its cosmogenic foundations.

Eliade's work has been very influential in this regard. Berger, for example, takes Eliade's definition and examines how those originary sacred narratives are refracted throughout media and society in his myth model:

**a myth**, defined as a sacred narrative that validates cultural beliefs and practices  
**psychoanalytic reflections of the myth** (when we can find them)  
**historical manifestations of that myth** (when we can find them)  
**the myth in elite culture** (operas, theatre, serious novels, etc.)  
**the myth in mass-mediated or popular culture** (songs, advertisements, TV shows)  
**the myth in everyday life** (when we can recognize it)  
(2013, p. 14)

He provides the two examples, one of 'Adam in the Garden of Eden' with a theme of natural innocence, and the other of the Oedipus myth:

<b>Myth/Sacred story</b>	Adam in the Garden of Eden. Theme of natural innocence.	Oedipus myth. Theme of son unknowingly killing father and marrying mother.
<b>Psychoanalytic manifestation</b>	Repression? Suppression?	Oedipus Complex. Love of child for parent of opposite gender.
<b>Historical experience</b>	Puritans come to USA to escape corrupt European civilization	Revolutions: American, French, Arab awakenings
<b>Elite culture</b>	American Adam figure in American novels. Henry James' <i>The American</i>	Sophocles, <i>Oedipus Rex</i> Shakespeare, <i>Hamlet</i>
<b>Popular culture</b>	Western...restore natural innocence to Virgin Land. <i>Shane</i>	Jack the Giant Killer, James Bond stories, <i>King Kong</i>
<b>Everyday life</b>	Escape from city and move to suburbs so kids can play on grass (and with grass)	Oedipus period in little children

Table 1. My recreation of Berger's table showing an example of his myth model as applied to a specific myth (2013, p. 15).

Berger's work has some serious flaws. His distinction between 'elite culture' and 'mass-mediated or popular culture', for example, goes unexplained. Furthermore, an issue Berger

identifies himself in a later work is that there are “separate categories for Psychoanalytic Theory, Historical Experience, Elite Culture, and Popular Culture but it can be argued that they are all actually part of everyday life” (2018, p. 55). The category of ‘everyday life’ appears to be more a miscellany for elements which do not fit under any other category. He is also inconsistent with his definitions and method. While he defines myth as “a sacred narrative”, in the example above he lists the myth as specifically Adam in the Garden of Eden, which would seem instead to refer to a specific character *within* a sacred narrative. In an earlier work, he uses Helen of Troy as the ‘myth’ in an example (2010, p. 6), a character who appears in numerous stories, a number of which at least have contributed to the popular understanding of Helen as a character. Either he does not consistently adhere to his own understanding of myth, or he falls into the trap Frog describes of seeing stories where there are none (2018, p. 10).

Flawed though it is, Berger’s work is an example of a model which extrapolates from understanding myth as a genre comprising sacred, religious narratives. For Berger, as with Eliade, the sacred narrative becomes a focal point for culture. Berger explains that “what this chart does is show what we might describe as the hidden, sacred, or mythic roots of many different aspects of our lives” (2013, p. 15). His intention is to trace everyday activity and contemporary cultural outputs back to what he calls myths or sacred stories. Thus, moving to the suburbs and Western films become manifestations of Adam’s pre-fruit-consuming tenancy in the Garden of Eden. Threats to this state of idyllic peace can therefore be traced back as manifestations of the fruit in this story (or perhaps the serpent or even Eve). For Berger, the model can in this way help to link cultural identities as a whole back to a particular set of origin myths, which are continually retold in various forms to validate and reinforce that identity. For instance, Berger argues that Americans have traditionally tried to define themselves as “un-Europeans in the same way that 7-Up has defined itself as ‘un-cola’” (2010, p. 4):

America	Europe
Nature	History
Innocence	Guilt
Individualism	Conformity
The future	The past
Hope	Memory
Forests	Cathedrals
Cowboy	Cavalier
Willpower	Class conflict
Equality	Hierarchy (Aristocracy)
Achievement	Ascription
Classless society	Class-bound society

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Nature food, raw food	Gourmet food
Clean living	Sensuality
Action	Theory
Agrarianism	Industrialism
The sacred	The profane

Table 2. My recreation of Berger's table showing what he perceives are opposing foundational values between the USA and Europe (2010, pp. 4–5).

This table, he stresses, is from a North American point of view, "contrasting themselves with a simplistic and stereotyped image of Europe" (2010, p. 5). The USA is not, of course, a 'classless society', and never has been. But it is, Berger argues, an aspiration or a belief that forms part of the American cultural identity—think of the 'American Dream', for instance, with the ideal of equality of opportunity for all.

Berger has previously used an onion metaphor to describe how his notion of myth functions in society: the myth lies in the centre, each layer that he describes such as historical experience, elite culture and so on functions as a new layer of the onion, and everyday life is the final, outermost layer (1974, p. 72). His overall contention, therefore, is this:

Let me suggest that there are a relatively limited number of myths, from the Greeks and Romans and the Bible, along with a number of other cultures and other sources, which can be described as 'cultural dominants'. They have shaped our consciousness in the West over the millennia. (2010, p. 6)

Myths as religious or sacred narratives form the core or basis of a culture, acting as constant reference points for all aspects of life, thereby guiding and shaping how we live and organise. In these understandings of myth, then, it is a genre that is perhaps more elevated, significant or central than most others.

Some argue for a more secular generic definition. For example, David Leeming writes the following:

A myth is a narrative which for many members of the culture that creates it might be literally or metaphorically 'true' while for others inside and outside of the culture it may be regarded as mere superstition ... The story of the parting of the Red Sea contains a religious truth, whether literal or metaphorical for many Jews, Christians and Muslims. For Hindus or Buddhists it is simply a myth in the sense of a false—even if beautiful—story. (2018, p. 15)

This broad definition construes myth as a type of narrative that has at its core some cultural truth. The story relates something fundamental about that culture, whether it is taken to be literally true or not, and thus is a story which holds less resonance for those embedded in other cultures. In this way, it functions very similarly to myths as a religious text-type, just allowing also for nonreligious stories. The important aspect for Leeming is that "myths always involve elements that transcend our ordinary experience of life. ... As cultural dreams,

myths, even if literally untrue, reflect something of a culture's sense of itself and its preoccupations" (2018, pp. 15–16).

To exemplify the understanding of myth as a text type more concretely, I now turn to three examples of different kinds of things to which this approach can be applied.

### **The *Odyssey***

In the understanding of myth as text type, the *Odyssey* can be seen in two ways. If one is looking at a specific telling of the story—for example, Emily Wilson's (2018) recent translation of Homer's telling—than that is a story which is an instantiation of the myth genre. The *Odyssey* might instead be considered as a genre or subgenre in itself, owing to its many varied tellings. An individual telling would be an instantiation of the *Odyssey* subgenre within the myth genre. Seeing the *Odyssey* as a genre unto itself leads us to more broad and liberal adaptations. For example, the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (Coen, 2000) might be considered a film within the *Odyssey* subgenre, despite not containing any of the locations or characters from Homer's famous telling explicitly.

### **Everyday life and popular culture**

Berger's work traces what he calls the "mythic roots" (2013, p. 15) of stories and genres in modern popular culture (alongside, for example, historical events and aspects of everyday life. Using as his root myth "Adam in the Garden of Eden. Theme of natural innocence", he finds a modern-day equivalent in "Westerns...restore natural innocence to Virgin Land. *Shane*" (2013, p. 15). So, for Berger, while we seem to have lost our way in terms of generating new myths, ancient myths still inform and influence our media. Myth is a text type, of which ancient myths are an instantiation; more recent media, such as the example he uses of *Shane* (G. Stevens, 1953), are then "camouflaged or modernized versions of ancient myths and legends" (2013, p. 14), a retelling of the same story with a different skin. Similarly, and even more colloquially, we may see this in metaphors such as calling a long and arduous journey an 'odyssey', implying (perhaps hyperbolically) that the journey we have just undertaken would, if told, be an instantiation of the *Odyssey* genre.

### ***Horizon Zero Dawn***

Through this lens, games are less straightforward to understand. While the debate on the relationship between games and narratives and the utility of narratology for understanding games is ongoing in game studies, I find it most useful to consider games as things which are not in themselves a kind of story or narrative, but which can contain stories or narratives. Souvik Mukherjee borrows the term "assemblage" from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to describe games, for example (2015, p. 15). And, clearly, some things we tend to call games make more use of narrative than others—compare *Tetris* (Pajitnov & Pokhilko, 1984) to *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013). In my view, it stretches the understanding of narrative too far to consider elements of games like systems, events and performative aspects like play as story. Therefore, I would not argue that *Horizon Zero Dawn* is, like *Shane* or the *Odyssey*, simply an instantiation of any particular genre in this different medium. There may be more

## 2 What is Myth?

of an argument to consider it under the broader umbrella of the subheader: an instantiation of the *text type* of myth ('text' being broader than 'narrative').

In any case, we can also trace myths in this understanding into *Horizon*, both in reading the stories within the game, and in observing the inclusions of some of the constituent parts of those stories. For example, throughout the game the player discovers a suite of AIs, tasked with different aspects that would allow humans to one day thrive again on the planet after the apocalypse of 2066. These AIs are named after Greek gods: GAIA is the 'mother' of all the subordinate AIs, AETHER detoxifies the atmosphere, APOLLO archives human history and culture, MINERVA brute-forces the hostile robots' deactivation codes, HADES reverses the planet to a lifeless state if a terraforming attempt fails, and so on. Although the references to the Greek pantheon are not understood by the inhabitants of Aloy's time (due to APOLLO being tampered with), they are likely understood by the player, of course to varying degrees. The game uses these names to generate ready-made associations. At a minimum: Gaia as a mother figure, Hades as a dark and destructive but necessary figure. Furthermore, the HADES AI's turning against GAIA mirrors the many battles in Greek mythology between younger gods and their progenitors.

We might also read the circumstances of *Horizon*'s gameworld through other stories. The story of Adam and Eve may have parallels to a postapocalyptic world being repopulated for the first time in a thousand years. The events leading up to the robot invasion (called the Faro Plague) and humanity's subsequent annihilation and eventual re-emergence is also reminiscent of various great flood myths.

## 2.2 Myth as archetypal

The archetype model sees myth as events, figures and motifs that spring from a set of hidden psychological universals. This understanding is most prominently put forward by psychoanalyst Carl Jung, who hypothesised that there exists a collective unconscious, "a common psychic substrate of a suprapersonal nature which is present in every one of us", the contents of which "are known as *archetypes*" (1959/1980b, p. 4). Myth and fairytales, he claims, are expressions of these archetypes in culture:

All the mythologized processes of nature, such as summer and winter, the phases of the moon, the rainy seasons, and so forth, are in no sense allegories of these objective occurrences; rather they are symbolic expressions of the inner, unconscious drama of the psyche which becomes accessible to man's consciousness by way of projection—that is, mirrored in the events of nature.  
(1959/1980b, p. 6)

These archetypes can be seen in archetypal events (e.g., a birth, a death), figures (e.g., the mother, the father, the wise old man) and motifs (broader groupings of these, e.g., a flood narrative, a creation story).

Campbell (1949/2008) takes Jung's ideas further. He argues that these more modular notions of archetypal events, figures and motifs can actually be knitted together into a single narrative structure which underlies all myth: the monomyth, or the Hero's Journey. This

begins with what “might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth” (1949/2008, p. 23), stitching together a progression of three archetypal motifs:

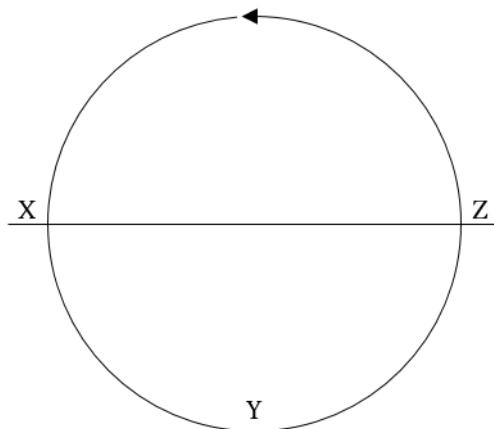


Figure 1. Graphical representation of Campbell’s (1949/2008, p. 23) separation–initiation–return cycle.

Campbell explains:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder (*x*): fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won (*y*): the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man (*z*). (1949/2008, p. 23)

More succinctly, he describes this as “*separation–initiation–return*” (1949/2008, p. 23). Onto this basic structure, he maps other archetypes:

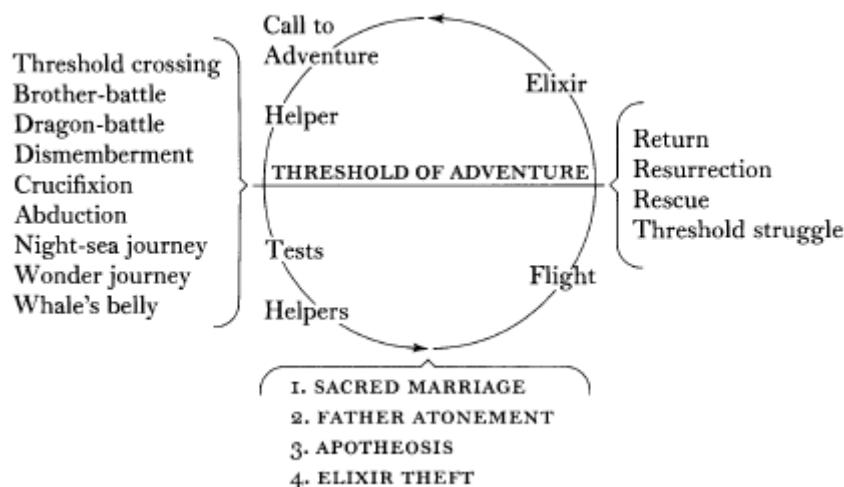


Figure 2. Graphical representation of Campbell’s monomyth (1949/2004, p. 227).

This, he argues, is the basic structure behind every myth, because it is a structure embedded in our psychology. As Campbell puts it, myth “is psychology misread as biography, history, and cosmology” (1949/2008, p. 219).

## 2 What is Myth?

Campbell's Hero's Journey has been the subject of much scholarly criticism on a number of grounds. For example, Steven F. Walker argues that "a Jungian analysis of mythology must constantly refer back to the individual psyche", but that Campbell's work lacks this (2002/2013, p. 95). Campbell's evidence for his universal pattern is also shaky: Robert A. Segal observes that while he "cites scores of hero myths to illustrate individual parts of his pattern ... he never applies his full pattern to even one myth" (2021, p. 87), a charge levelled also by a contemporary of Campbell's, Stanley Edgar Hyman (1949, p. 455), who found the work overall too general and mystical. In a similar vein, Robert S. Ellwood accuses Campbell of exhibiting "little concern about mythic variants or philological issues, or even about the cultural or ritual context of his material" (1999, p. 130).

Ellwood also notes that Campbell "was reportedly anti-Semitic, anti-Black, and in 1940 unable to grasp the threat represented by Hitler" (1999, p. 131), at odds with the mild-mannered, grandfatherly demeanour portrayed in later interviews (1999, p. 127). While no doubt troubling, this criticism may seem superfluous. After all, I would not suggest that every scholar I cite in this dissertation is a paragon of virtue. But critics of Campbell note that his outlook has significant impact on his theory. Sarah E. Bond and Joel Christensen (2021), for example, argue that "Campbell's hero is ruggedly individual; it uses weaker people as instruments; and it has no room for collective action, for families, or for bodies that fail to conform: the aged, the disabled, the sick" (2021), and that this hero does not emerge out of the body of evidence Campbell studies but is imposed on world mythologies which are cherry-picked for supporting evidence. Stephanie C. Jennings (2022) similarly notes that the authoritarian tendencies of Campbell's own politics form the basis for his monomyth, which is then imposed on unwilling world mythologies. Jennings (2022) goes on to describe how this heroic authoritarianism pervades (particularly AAA) videogames.

Despite the many criticisms of archetypes and particularly of the monomyth, the Hero's Journey has in recent decades become something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. George Lucas famously used Campbell's structure as a blueprint for the original *Star Wars* trilogy (Wagner, 1999), for example. And in part due to the enormous attention Lucas drew to the monomyth, many writing guides for authors, screenwriters and game writers also now use it as a blueprint. Christopher Vogler (1998/2007) has written 'A Practical Guide' to the Hero's Journey in his book, *The Writer's Journey, Mythic Structure for Writers*, for instance, and Evan Skolnick's (2014) book *Video Game Storytelling: What Every Developer Needs to Know About Narrative Techniques* devotes a chapter to advocating for its use. In developing *Journey* (Thatgamecompany, 2012), studio co-founder Jenova Chen talks about using the Hero's Journey explicitly to evoke a "universal" experience (Alexander, 2012; see also Guyker, 2014 for an analysis of the game through the monomyth).

These applications of the monomyth have two main issues beyond the theoretical and methodological problems in themselves. First, Campbell devised the monomyth as a descriptive theory, not a prescriptive blueprint. The insights that are gained from using the structure to identify commonalities between disparate traditions are meaningless when comparing stories which *consciously* use it as a guide. Basically, it misses the point. Second, as folklorist Alan Dundes argues, "it is always dangerous to use ready-made patterns since there is the inevitable risk of forcing material into the prefabricated Procrustean pattern" (1962, p. 96). If

everyone is writing according to the same structure, we miss the chance to explore alternative ones.

### The *Odyssey*

An archetypal understanding of the *Odyssey* views the story as the incidental manifestation of psychological archetypes. The goal of such an analysis is to discover within the *Odyssey* those aspects of the collective unconscious from which the particulars of the story stem. Carol Leader (2009) has written a Jungian perspective on the *Odyssey* in this way, and we can see the goals of such an analysis in this example passage:

And now Odysseus has a final journey to make that has a cultural and collective aim as well as a personal one: Tiresius the seer has told him in Hades that, as an act of respect towards Poseidon, and in reparation for the blinding of Poseidon's son Polyphemus at the beginning of his journey, Odysseus must travel overland taking a ship's oar on his shoulder. When he comes to a place where the oar is unrecognized and is thought to be a fan for winnowing grain, he must plant the oar in the land, making sacrifices to the Gods. This, I suggest, is a powerful ending symbol from Homer. It reaches forwards into the future and points to the bringing of surface land and deep sea together in a final image that represents the unification and the transcendence of opposites required for radical peace. (2009, pp. 517–518)

On similar lines, Campbell uses the sirens in the *Odyssey* as an example of the “threshold guardian”, the figure in the monomyth who stands “for the limits of the hero’s present sphere, or life horizon” (1949/2008, p. 64). Interestingly, however, Segal argues that because Odysseus’ ultimate return is “an entirely personal triumph … Odysseus’s story would thereby fail to qualify as a myth” (2021, p. 87), as Campbell distinguishes fairy tale from myth on those grounds.

### Everyday life and popular culture

Archetypes being psychological in nature, they can appear anywhere in everyday life and so popular culture too. For example, Hans-Joachim Backe examines the television series *Luther* (Cross, 2010–2019), arguing that “the series appears to foreground influences of a more nuanced (if still simplified) psychoanalytic model based rather on Jungian than Freudian thought” (2016, p. 137). Harold A. Herzog and Shelley L. Galvin (1992) analyse the American tabloid press, attempting to identify from the coverage of animals and human-animal relations universal archetypes. Along similar lines, Dan Berkowitz (2005) explores journalistic coverage on terrorism for the archetypes employed. The contemporary ways in which archetypes tend to be used will be contingent on the time and context, but the archetypes themselves are argued to be a fundamental part of the human psyche.

### *Horizon Zero Dawn*

In this framework, both the narrative elements as well as the systems and gameplay affordances might be read as springing from these psychological archetypes; Sylens as a

trickster figure, for example. More interestingly, we might note how the game plays with our perception of particular archetypes. For example, take the mother archetype. Much of the game is dedicated to discovering who fulfils that role, and in what way they do. Aloy believes she is being hunted due to her looking like a human mother, who she had never known of, having been told by her Nora clan matriarchs that her mother is the mountain All-Mother. Both turn out to be true, in a sense, as she discovers that she is a genetic clone of the woman she believed to be her mother, Elisabet Sobeck, created by the AI GAIA (another mother figure), housed within the mountain the matriarchs spoke of.

It is also worth repeating a point I made in the introduction that the archetypal and particularly Campbellian understanding of myth is the one which has so far been most frequently applied to games.

## 2.3 Myth as explanation

The understanding of myth as explanation is what is perhaps responsible for the colloquial understanding of myth as a commonly believed but false claim. Myth for some is essentially proto-history and/or proto-science: outdated and debunked theories for what happened, how things happen or why they happen. This approach supposes that creation myths, for instance, were not seen as metaphorical, or as primarily holding a cultural function, but as a genuine attempt at explaining a true cosmogeny. Myth is therefore the same kind of claim as the Big Bang theory, for example—an example Frog uses (2018, p. 15)—just claims for which we had ‘less-sophisticated’ means to investigate. For some, this explains also why myths can appear universal. Robert A. Armour, for example, describes myths as “methods of explaining the human desire for love, justice, honor, learning, and other universals” (1986/2016, p. 158).

Segal (2013, p. 105) identifies this as a primarily 19<sup>th</sup> century approach, although E. Thomas Lawson (1978) remarks that the tradition is alive and well in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, foundational play scholar Johan Huizinga writes that “in myth, primitive man seeks to account for the world of phenomena by grounding it in the Divine” (1938/2014, pp. 4–5).<sup>4</sup> Lawson observes that the most prominent scholars of myth in the late 1800s, E. B. Tylor and J. G. Frazer, both “take for granted that myth is a part of religion and, as such, serves to explain physical events” (2013, p. 105). So, myth here comprises the parts of religion which seek to *explain* the world, both in terms of natural phenomena like science does (the sun moving across the sky is the sun-god Ra travelling on the Mandjet), and in terms of past events like history does (the world was created when Gaia, Uranus, Nyx and the other primordial deities emerged out of Chaos). Sociologist Émile Durkheim takes a similar view. While he never directly defines myth, he groups it alongside other concepts:

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<sup>4</sup> Huizinga appears to pre-emptively counter the approach I develop as well. He writes: “myth, rightly understood and not in the corrupt sense which modern propaganda has tried to force upon the word, is the appropriate vehicle for primitive man’s ideas about the cosmos” (1938/2014, p. 129). I hope to show that my corrupt, modern propaganda is, in fact, useful.

Beliefs, myths, dogmas, and legends are either representations or systems of representations that express the nature of sacred things, the virtues and powers attributed to them, their history and their relationships with one another as well as with profane things. (1912/1995, p. 34)

Myths here have the function of expressing the *nature* of sacred things, perhaps expanding on questions of why a particular sacred object is sacred, how it came to be so, and so on. Where is this rite from? Why do we perform that ritual?

The theory of myth as explanation has a semantic problem: why is it insufficient to call it science that has since been debunked? If myth as explanation is the same kind of claim as the Big Bang theory, then it is surely no different to any other scientific claim that has been debunked by new evidence. Robin Horton makes this kind of claim in his titular comparison between ‘African Traditional Thought and Western Science’ (1967), noting that “both in traditional Africa and in the science-oriented West, theoretical thought is vitally concerned with the prediction of events”, the only difference being the success of those models and “reaction to predictive failure” (1967, p. 167). For Horton, science and myth differ therefore in *idiom*, where science is impersonal and open and religious thought (with which myth is equated) is personal and closed, meaning that there is “an absence of any awareness of alternatives [which] makes for an absolute acceptance of the established theoretical tenets, and removes any possibility of questioning them”, and that this is what we call “sacred” (1967, p. 156). Lawson strongly criticises Horton’s approach specifically (1978, pp. 510–511), but turns to Claude Lévi-Strauss to help attack the premises of myths as explanations more broadly (1978, p. 518). In the passage Lawson cites, Lévi-Strauss writes:

Some claim that human societies merely express, through their mythology, fundamental feelings common to the whole of mankind, such as love, hate, or revenge or that they try to provide some kind of explanations for phenomena which they cannot otherwise understand—astronomical, meteorological, and the like. But why should these societies do it in such elaborate and deviant ways, when all of them are also acquainted with empirical explanations? (1963, p. 207)

In other words, to attribute a solely or chiefly explanatory function to mythology is to presume that that society does not also have some conception of empiricism.

In this way, it seems to me that this understanding of myth cannot escape the relational deixis Frog warns against. Seeing myth as explanation and then using that definition to describe what other cultures are doing is to misunderstand and misrepresent what the purpose and function of those myths are, and in so doing to patronise and denigrate the community being studied.

### **The *Odyssey***

This understanding of myth would therefore see the *Odyssey* as a myth which performs the function within the ancient Greek religion of explaining certain events and phenomena. As well as simply documenting the existence of monsters and figures like the Cyclops

Polyphemus, the Sirens, and so on, it may also be read along these lines as an explanation or justification for principles like *xenia* (hospitality towards guests).

### Everyday life and popular culture

Within everyday life, these explanations may inform behaviours and decisions, such as a literal belief in the power of a particular ritual to, for instance, bring good luck, such as wearing a lucky pair of socks. Historically, this would often be tied to religion, where activities like the Isthmian Games were held to honour Poseidon, believing that to assuage the god into calming the seas. Popular culture and mass media may derive some basic premises from these explanations, or otherwise adapt the myths that explain them.

### Horizon Zero Dawn

It seems unconvincing to read *Horizon Zero Dawn* as itself an explanatory myth like the *Odyssey*, because we know that it is not used seriously within society as a means of explaining phenomena. Rather, we can see in *Horizon Zero Dawn* the emulation of these processes, for instance when we are explained the creation myth of the Nora. Due to the context of the game, the player is also encouraged to view these myths as attempted but poor explanations, because we already know to what they refer—such as when Studious Palas tries to explain to Aloy his theory of what these ‘ritual vessels’ were used for, while the player can see that they are simple branded coffee cups (cf. chapter 5.9 *Horizon Zero Dawn*).

## 2.4 Myth as structure

The structuralist approach to myth is most closely associated with the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. Prior to him, however, is the Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp.<sup>5</sup> The differences between their approaches demonstrate two of the most prominent, distinct avenues that structuralist approaches go down: syntagmatic and paradigmatic. While Propp’s morphology preserves the linear narrative structure of the tales he analyses, “Lévi-Strauss’s position is essentially that linear sequential structure is but apparent or manifest content, whereas the paradigmatic or schematic structure is the more important latent content” (Propp, 1958/1968, introduction to the second edition by Dundes, p. xii). Structuralist approaches arise from noting perceived similarities and consistencies between many stories, particularly when they emerge from different cultures. Lévi-Strauss begins his study with the question, “if the content of a myth is contingent, how are we going to explain that throughout the world myths do resemble one another so much?” (1955, p. 429). This question is not unique to structuralists. As Lévi-Strauss (1955, p. 429) points out, psychoanalysts answer this with archetypes: myths are expressions of deep-seated, universal psychological functions. Lévi-Strauss is not convinced by this. Before going into this, however, I will stay chronological and lay out Propp’s approach first. Structuralist approaches to myth tend to abstract particular stories in one way of another, defining and isolating some kind of

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<sup>5</sup> Though it should be noted that Lévi-Strauss’ earliest work on the subject (1955) is published *before* the translation of Propp’s *Morphology of the Folktale* (1958/1968). Propp’s work was first published in Russian in 1928.

individual unit and providing rules for the configuration of multiple such units. Propp's morphology is a prime example of this.

Propp calls the object of his study 'folktales' and not 'myths', but this does not reflect any strong formal distinction. Most accurately, he says, they should be called "tales subordinated to a seven-personage scheme", but that this is too awkward and "defined from a historical point of view, they then merit the antique, now discarded, name of mythical tales" (1958/1968, p. 100). So the name is not centrally important, and scholars of myth have in any case taken up Propp's morphology. Propp explains in the foreword what he means by *morphology* and his task in the book:

The word "morphology" means the study of forms. In botany, the term "morphology" means the study of the components of a plant; their mutual relationship, and the relation of the parts to the whole—in other words, the study of a plant's structure.

But what about a morphology of the folktale? Scarcely anyone has thought about the possibility of such a concept.

Nevertheless, it is possible to make an examination of the form of the folktale which will be as exact as a morphology of organic formations. (Propp, 1958/1968, p. xxv)

Propp seeks to explain the underlying structure of the folktale, which therefore have a finite number of possible, fundamental elements with specific methods of combination.

Once codified, these elements and syntagmatic structures can be written out like formulas. For example, here is a complete folktale in Propp's analysis:

$$\gamma^1 \beta^1 \delta^1 A^1 C \uparrow \left\{ \begin{array}{c} [DE^1 \text{ neg. } F \text{ neg.}] \\ d^1 E^1 F^1 \end{array} \right\} G^1 K^1 \downarrow [Pr^1 D^1 E^1 F^1 = Rs^4]^3$$

Figure 3. An example of a complete folktale laid out in Propp's morphology (1958/1968, p. 99).

This is what Propp calls a *single move* tale. How does this equation come about? The morphology is centred on the *dramatis personae*. Though they are very varied, Propp argues that there is a much more limited set of actions attributed to them. These *functions* are what Propp is chiefly concerned with. The specifics of the *dramatis personae* are secondary to their function within the tale. On the basis of this, Propp lays out four core observations:

1. *Functions of characters serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled. They constitute the fundamental components of a tale.*
  2. *The number of functions known to the fairy tale is limited. ...*
  3. *The sequence of functions is always identical. ...*
  4. *All fairy tales are of one type in regard to their structure.*
- (1958/1968, pp. 21–23)

Each symbol in the previous equation (Figure 3) corresponds to one function, with superscript numbers denoting variations. The first function he lays out is useful as an example:

I. ONE OF THE MEMBERS OF A FAMILY ABSENTS HIMSELF FROM HOME. (Definition: absention. Designation:  $\beta$ .)

1. *The person absenting himself can be a member of the older generation* ( $\beta^1$ ) Parents leave for work (113). “The prince has to go on a distant journey, leaving his wife to the care of strangers” (265). “Once, he (a merchant) went away to foreign lands” (197). Usual form of absention: going to work, to the forest, to trade, to war, “on business.”
2. *An intensified form of absention is represented by the death of parents* ( $\beta^2$ ).
3. *Sometimes members of the younger generation absent themselves* ( $\beta^3$ ). They go visiting (101), fishing (108), for a walk (137), out to gather berries (244). (1958/1968, p. 26)

There are 31 functions in total which follow each other in specific sequences according to narrative logic. Propp also identifies *spheres of action* whereby particular sets of functions are typically grouped in similar characters. For example, “the sphere of action of the *villain*” is constituted by “villainy (A); a fight or other forms of struggle with the hero (H); pursuit (Pr)” (1958/1968, p. 79). The seven spheres of action are villain, donor, helper, princess and her father, dispatcher, hero, and false hero (1958/1968, pp. 79–80). These may be distributed between the characters of the tale in three ways: one sphere of action per character; one character representing multiple spheres of action; or one sphere of action distributed among multiple characters (1958/1968, pp. 80–82). With this established, Propp defines what a folktale is and what constitutes a *single* tale too:

Morphologically, a tale (*skázka*) may be termed any development proceeding from villainy (A) or a lack (a), through intermediary functions to marriage (W\*), or to other functions employed as a dénouement. Terminal functions are at times a reward (F), a gain or in general the liquidation of misfortune (K), an escape from pursuit (Rs), etc. This type of development is termed by us a *move* (*xod*). Each new act of villainy, each new lack creates a new move. ... One move may directly follow another, but they may also interweave; a development which has begun pauses, and a new move is inserted. ... Special devices of parallelism, repetitions, etc., lead to the fact that one tale may be composed of several moves. (1958/1968, p. 92)

Propp’s morphology is in this was syntagmatic in that it defines and isolates constitutive elements and provides rules for how they are organised sequentially.

Lévi-Strauss’ structuralist approach is, by contrast, paradigmatic. Like Propp, however, Lévi-Strauss isolates modular elements, which he first calls *gross constituent units* (1955, p. 431) and later the much catchier *mytheme* (1963, p. 211), following linguistic terms like *phoneme* and *morpheme*. Lévi-Strauss sees myth as a part of language:

1. If there is a meaning to be found in mythology, this cannot reside in the isolated elements which enter into the composition of a myth, but only in the way those elements are combined. 2. Although myth belongs to the same

category as language, being, as a matter of fact, only part of it, language in myth unveils specific properties. 3. Those properties are only to be found *above* the ordinary linguistic level; that is, they exhibit more complex features beside those which are to be found in any kind of linguistic expression. (1955, p. 431)

Lévi-Strauss' method for analysing myths seems at first very similar to Propp's: "breaking down its story into the shortest possible sentences, and writing each such sentence on an index card bearing a number corresponding to the unfolding of the story" (1955, p. 431). In doing so, "a certain function is, at a given time, predicated to a given subject ... each gross constituent unit will consist in a relation" (1955, p. 431). This, however, is limiting:

In the first place, it is well known to structural linguists that constituent units on all levels are made up of relations and the true difference between our gross units and the others stays unexplained; moreover we still find ourselves in the realm of a non-reversible time since the numbers of the cards correspond to the unfolding of the informant's speech. Thus, the specific character of mythological time, which as we have seen is both reversible and non-reversible, synchronic and diachronic, remains unaccounted for. (1955, p. 431)

Lévi-Strauss instead proposes two axes, one for *langue* and another for *parole*, corresponding to the reversible and non-reversible chronic aspects. He relates this to an orchestral score:

An orchestra score, in order to become meaningful, has to be read diachronically along one axis—that is, page after page, and from left to right—and also synchronically along the other axis, all the notes which are written vertically making up one gross constituent unit, i.e. one bundle of relations. (1955, p. 432)

He proposes at this point to use a concrete example:

The myth will be treated as would be an orchestra score perversely presented as a unilinear series and where our task is to re-establish the correct disposition. As if, for instance, we were confronted with a sequence of the type: 1,2,4,7,8,2,3,4,6,8,1,4,5,7,8,1,2,5,7,3,4,5,6,8 ..., the assignment being to put all the 1's together, all the 2's, the 3's, etc.; the result is a chart:

1	2		4		7	8
	2	3	4		6	8
1			4	5	7	8
1	2			5	7	
		3	4	5		
				6		8

(1955, pp. 432–433)

## 2 What is Myth?

What do we gain by configuring this narrative sheet music? Reading from left to right, top to bottom constitutes the *telling* of the myth: the sequence of events in the narrative. Considering each column instead as a unit and reading those from left to right is what we should do to *understand* the myth, he says (1955, p. 433). In his example of the Oedipus myth, the first column gathers events which have to do with noticeably too-intimate blood relations, the second the inversion, blood relations killing each other, the third, monsters being slain, and the fourth, difficulties in walking and behaving straight (1955, p. 433). Reading these columns, Lévi-Strauss produces his interpretation of the myth:

The myth has to do with the inability, for a culture which holds the belief that mankind is autochthonous ... to find a satisfactory transition between this theory and the knowledge that human beings are actually born from the union of man and woman. Although the problem obviously cannot be solved, the Oedipus myth provides a kind of logical tool which ... replaces the original problem: born from one or born from two? born from difference or born from same? By a correlation of this type, the overrating of blood relations to the underrating of blood relations as the attempt to escape autochthony is to the impossibility to succeed in it. Although experience contradicts theory, social life verifies the cosmology by its similarity of structure. Hence the cosmology is true. (1955, p. 434)

This is why Lévi-Strauss' structuralism is paradigmatic rather than syntagmatic. Ferdinand de Saussure's (1916/2013) notion of *paradigms* as opposed to *syntagms* is key here, where syntagmatic relations are concerned with sequences while paradigmatic ones are concerned with substitution. *The man killed the bear* and *the bear killed the man* are syntagmatically different because although the same linguistic signs are used, they are put in a different sequence, changing the meaning. *The man killed the rabbit* is the same as the first sentence syntagmatically, but different paradigmatically because we have substituted a word without altering the structure—i.e., without altering the *relations* between the ‘slots’ in the sentence. *Bear* and *rabbit* both perform the same role in the sentence—the animal being killed by the man—and so are part of the same paradigm. Lévi-Strauss is chiefly concerned with the paradigmatic *relations* between elements, rather than the elements in and of themselves. Lévi-Strauss theorises that the purpose of myth is, as in his interpretation of Oedipus, to mediate between a binary, paradigmatic pair.

By largely ignoring the specificities and contingencies of a myth and instead focusing on these groups of mythemes and the relations between groups, Lévi-Strauss' analyses claim to arrive at how the society which produced the myth understands the world and how they reconcile contradictions. Because of this, Lévi-Strauss relates myth to science in opposition to how many anthropologists had done before him:

The kind of logic which is used by mythical thought is as rigorous as that of modern science ... the difference lies not in the quality of the intellectual process, but in the nature of the things to which it is applied. (1955, p. 444)

This myth versus science opposition that Lévi-Strauss challenges is closely related to the fallacious dichotomy between ‘savage’ and ‘civilised’ peoples. The ‘primitive’ mind, Lévi-Strauss says, had previously been defined by claims that because they supposedly lived purely subsistent lives, they were incapable of “disinterested thought” (1978/1995, p. 16). Lévi-Strauss argues the mode of thinking is the same—“a need or desire to understand the world around them” towards which they “proceed by intellectual means, exactly as a philosopher, or even to some extent a scientist, can and would do” (1978/1995, p. 16)—and the chief difference is in fact between writing or non-writing societies (1978/1995, p. 15). By arguing for the rational, disinterested quality of mythical thinking, Dundes argues that Lévi-Strauss’ structuralism “has helped lead to the new notion of myth (and other forms of folklore) as *models*” (Propp, 1958/1968, introduction to the second edition by Dundes, p. xiii). The notion of myth as a model is important to my understanding.

There are plenty of criticisms of structuralist thought in general and Propp and Lévi-Strauss in particular. The most obvious critique of structuralist approaches is that they ignore or downplay historical and cultural contingencies and specificities. For poststructuralist critics of Lévi-Strauss like Jacques Derrida, the problem is also in the goal of structuralist analyses, which implicitly seems to be to find some kind of centre or origin or ‘true’ meaning. For Derrida, structuralism is in this way a totalising force which forces organisation and structure on that which is far more arbitrary:

There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of play. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who ... has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play. (1978, p. 292)

Structuralism seeks to impose order on that which has none, for Derrida, denying the element of free play inherent in the sign.

Structuralist approaches to myth go well beyond Propp and Lévi-Strauss, but in the interest of space I leave them as broadly representative of two important types of structuralist theories: syntagmatic and paradigmatic. Here, I am less concerned with the specifics of structuralist tradition and more in its approach to myth in general. Overall, what these approaches share is (a) a view that myths are a kind of story and (b) that specific myths in themselves are—to a greater or lesser extent—incidental manifestations of some underlying *structure*, the nature of which it is the structuralist’s task to ascertain.

### The *Odyssey*

A structural analysis of the *Odyssey* attempts to break it down into its constituent parts to glean the underlying organisation of the story and to analyse that. In Stephen V. Tracy’s (1997) structural analysis, for example, he finds that “parallel structures [in form] underscore the primary theme of the poem, namely, the parallel journeys of the hero, of his son, and of his father” and that each of these journeys “involves elements of death and rebirth” (1997, p.

378). Other structural analyses in the Lévi-Strauss vein might consider what binary paradigms the epic establishes and mediates, and what this might say about the mind.

### Everyday life and popular culture

Structural analysis has been applied to many texts that would often be considered ‘popular culture’, such as J. P. Dumont and J. Monod’s analysis of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1978) and Berger’s analysis of James Bond and *Dr. No* (2013, pp. 25–30), attempting to prise out the paradigmatic oppositional pairs. For popular culture in the sense of the everyday, it is more difficult to apply structural analysis, primarily because it is chiefly concerned with narrative. It may be argued that structural analysis of myths can help to explain some elements of popular culture.

### *Horizon Zero Dawn*

A structuralist analysis of *Horizon Zero Dawn* may seek to lay out its key events in narrative sequence—particularly a more Proppian analysis. This may prove difficult. Even though it is what we might call a ‘story-driven’ game, it is also open world and allows the player freedom to travel around and undertake sidequests. Narrative-focused analyses may have to ignore these aspects and focus only on the main questline as a sequence. A paradigmatic approach may find it easier to deal with the nonlinearity of games, focusing instead on what binary oppositions are presented. In *Horizon Zero Dawn*, these may include nature versus technology, religion versus science, family versus tribe. This kind of analysis is not common in game studies, but not unheard of (e.g., Kim, 2009).

## 2.5 Myth as discourse

Frog identifies a shift in the study of myth towards frameworks which understand myth “in terms of signs or symbols rather than stories” (2018, p. 20), and that Barthes’ *Mythologies* (1972/2009) was pivotal to that turn. Approaches like Barthes’ situate myth closer to us in two main ways. One is temporally, in that he analyses contemporary myths that govern our society *now*, rather than myth being the preserve of classicists, say. The other is socially, in that myth is something that governs *our* society *now*, rather than it being seen as a feature of ‘less developed’ or ‘primitive’ societies. Barthes does this through a theory of myth that is not story-based, but rather a kind of discourse, a mode of expression, “a type of speech” (1972/2009, p. 131). As a type of speech rather than an object of speech, myth for Barthes can be anything, because through this particular way of speaking we can mythologise anything (1972/2009, p. 131). In particular, Barthes identifies the process of *naturalisation*: mythic speech seeks to make otherwise arbitrary or cultural signification seem a part of the natural order, as a fact of life rather than an interchangeable premise. Since myth as discourse strongly informs my approach in the following chapter, I will leave this section briefer.

### The *Odyssey*

In the Barthesian mode of analysis, with the *Odyssey* we might rather consider what role the epic plays *today*. A comparable example is Barthes mini essay ‘The Romans in Film’. Here,

Barthes observes that all the characters in Joseph L. Mankiewicz's *Julius Caesar* (1953) "are wearing fringes ... and the bald are not admitted, although there are plenty to be found in Roman history" (1972/2009, p. 15). This is the visual signifier of Roman-ness, what mythically establishes their historical veracity. We could analyse the *Odyssey* similarly, observing how it is told and adapted today, what images linger in society and their mythic effects.

### **Everyday life and popular culture**

Barthes' *Mythologies* consists primarily of mini essays identifying myths in popular culture according to his understanding. These types of readings, Barthes stresses, are necessarily subjective and contingent: one can only read a myth as it appears here and now to oneself (1972/2009, p. 153). For example, Barthes' analyses French toys, noting their innocent appearance and reputation but ideological underpinnings.

French toys: one could not find a better illustration of the fact that the adult Frenchman sees the child as another self. ... Toys here reveal the list of all the things the adult does not find unusual: war bureaucracy, ugliness, Martians, etc. (1972/2009, p. 57)

An example of my own reading—in the here and now of the cultures I am enmeshed in—would be the myth of the *self-made billionaire*. The internet is today replete with hagiographies of billionaires, particularly in the US media, written in this aspirational mode that tells the reader how they made their money (e.g., Au-Yeung, 2021 on Whitney Wolfe Herd; Megía, 2022 on Alexandr Wang; Sauer, 2022 on Rihanna). When we tell the stories of these people in this way, we produce a frame. Frames always both include and exclude. This frame excludes the enormous assistance they invariably did receive (inheritance, pre-existing powerful networks, parental assistance, etc.). It includes three core notions: the individual, money and the means for acquiring the money (business acumen, artistic talent, etc.). In framing these elements together, a causal relation between them is implied, naturalising the notion that *an individual*, through *hard work* and the *application of their unique talent* acquired *billions*. I go further into this example in the following chapter, but it serves to demonstrate myths in everyday life produced by discourse.

### ***Horizon Zero Dawn***

This approach to myth may excavate from *Horizon Zero Dawn* what modern discourses the game taps into, what presumptions the gameworld appears to bake in. To a large extent, this is what my later analysis of the game does (5.9 *Horizon Zero Dawn*). In brief, though, we might analyse the game for how it deals with discourses surrounding technology and in particular artificial intelligence (e.g., Faith, 2018; Fernández-Caro, 2019), as well as climate change (e.g., Condis, 2020; Woolbright, 2018). We may also consider the game's representation of gender (e.g., Forni, 2019; Meier, 2022; P. P. Vieira & da Mota, 2018). In both academic and popular discourse, there is much discussion surrounding Aloy as a woman playable figure of a AAA game. Although the works I have cited here do not use myth as a framework explicitly, their approaches broadly align with the notion of myth as discourse, each scholar considering what underlying discourses the game taps into.



# 3 TOWARDS MYTHOLUDICS

“We reach here the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature”, Barthes writes (1972/2009, p. 154). Myth turns history into nature. Contingency into universality. Arbitrariness into causation. Ought into is. Discourse into ontology. These claims do not describe myth entirely, but for me they do get to the heart of what myth *does*. Mythology is about the construction of truth. Frog describes myth as “models of knowing the world and things in it” (2021a, p. 161); David Graeber and David Wengrow as “the way in which human societies give structure and meaning to experience” (2021, p. 525); Midgley as “imaginative patterns, networks of powerful symbols that suggest particular ways of interpreting the world” (2004/2011, p. 1). These notions better describe myth as I understand it.

My understanding begins primarily with Barthes in two ways. The first is the understanding of myth as signs, symbols, and collections thereof. The second is the notion of naturalisation as central. I see mythologisation primarily as a process by which a particular understanding of the world—including values, customs, rules, and so on—is naturalised within a particular community. This naturalisation happens through the enactment of the model for understanding the world through stories, structures, rituals, art, rhetorics, and more. Within that, there is scope to use other approaches—such as seeing myth as a text-type—when appropriate, i.e., when dealing with those aspects of mythic expression to which they pertain. The important thing is that it is not exclusive: a type of text *can* be seen as mythic, it just does not have to be. Frog makes a similar distinction when he cautions against mixing up stories as myths *in themselves* rather than as *reflective* of a mythology (2021b, p. 142). For this reason also, I often illustrate mythologies with examples that range from the ‘canonical’ classics of literature to comics, film to political speeches, jokes to forum discussions. This is intentional because it demonstrates the very varied and sometimes unexpected ways in which mythologies permeate through society. A myth can just as easily be expressed in an epic poem as it can in a comedic tweet. As I discuss in a later section of this chapter, the medium is not meaningless and in fact shapes the form, propagation and interpretation of mythologies greatly. But, broadly speaking, no medium is fundamentally inaccessible to any particular mythology. In this vein, it would be appropriate to start with a more thorough treatment of Barthes’ ideas and how and why they are useful for the study of games.

## Barthesian myth

Barthes’ turn towards myth as discourse was, as Frog notes, pivotal in the recent study of myth. This is both in conceiving myth “in terms of signs or symbols rather than stories” and in seeing myth as a part of everyday, modern culture, rather than as the preserve of the primitive, pre-scientific mind. This helps to remove ourselves and our analyses from the

“relational deixis” (Frog, 2018, p. 7) whereby we see ourselves as ‘outside’ myth looking in on other, less enlightened, people.

In *Mythologies* (1972/2009), Barthes begins with a series of short essays analysing the mythologies of seemingly random parts of culture. Some of these include ‘Toys’, ‘Steak and Chips’, ‘The Romans in Films’ and ‘Plastic’. He concludes with an essay on the theoretical underpinning of this understanding of myth, titled ‘Myth Today’. It is not coincidental that this more theoretical part of the work comes at the end, emerging “from the pragmatic (and, in style, journalistic) ‘readings’ rather than underpinning them” (McDougall, 2013, p. 4).

Barthes begins ‘Myth Today’ straightforwardly:

What is a myth, today? I shall give at the outset a first, very simple answer, which is perfectly consistent with etymology: *myth is a type of speech*. (1972/2009, p. 131)<sup>6</sup>

Calling myth a “*type of speech*”—“*une parole*” (1957, p. 181)—is crucial. “Myth is not defined by the object of its message”, Barthes clarifies, “but by the way in which it utters this message” (1972/2009, p. 131). More specifically, he conceives of myth as a semiotic system. But, it is a “*second-order semiological system*”, meaning that it is built directly on top of an existing semiotic structure; the complete sign of the first system becomes the signifier in the second (1972/2009, p. 137).

1. Signifier	2. Signified
3. Sign	
I. SIGNIFIER	II. SIGNIFIED
III. SIGN	

Table 3. My recreation of Barthes’ table visualising his system of myth in relation to semiotics (1972/2009, p. 138).

The first semiotic system, numbered 1, 2 and 3, represents the traditional semiotic process creating what Barthes calls the “*language-object*” (1972/2009, p. 138). The second system, numbered I, II and III, takes as its signifier the complete sign of the language-object, adding additional significeds to it. In this way, it works as a “*metalinguage*” (1972/2009, p. 138). Because in this formulation both systems share the same terminology—signifier, signified, sign—he introduced terms intended to disambiguate which I summarise here:

- [1. Signifier] = meaning
- [I. SIGNIFIER] = form
- [2. Signified] and [II. SIGNIFIED] = concept
- [3. Sign] = sign
- [III. SIGN] = signification (1972/2009, p. 140)

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<sup>6</sup> The nod to being consistent with etymology seems targeted towards understandings of myth as story based on a simplistic translation of *mythos* as ‘story’.

For Barthes, myth is a “parasitical” system (1972/2009, p. 140). Myth takes its starting point from a sign, for which “the meaning is *already complete*” (1972/2009, p. 140). “When it becomes form, the meaning leaves its contingency behind; it empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains” (1972/2009, p. 141). The sign is able to become the form by being emptied of its existing concept, to be replaced by a new, mythic concept by means of signification. Because myth straddles these two systems, Barthes argues, it is able to recall the first-order signification at will: “the meaning will be for the form like an instantaneous reserve of history, a tamed richness, which it is possible to call and dismiss in a sort of rapid alternation” (1972/2009, p. 141). In this way, “*myth hides nothing*: its function is to distort, not to make disappear” (1972/2009, p. 145). Myth relies on the existing sign and does not destroy it, but rather *re-presents* it, *re-signifies* it.

A crucial concept for Barthes and in my understanding of myth is *naturalisation*. Because myth is a semiotic system, it is able to mimic the process by which the connection between signifier and signified is made logical and natural.

In a first (exclusively linguistic) system, causality would be, literally, natural: fruit and vegetable prices fall because they are in season. In the second (mythical) system, causality is artificial, false; but it creeps, so to speak, through the back door of Nature. (1972/2009, p. 155)

By mirroring this first system, myth is able to assert the same kind of causality, even though the same principles actually do not apply. In this way it is a parasitical system.

Barthes outlines seven further characteristics of myth, while stressing that they are neither exhaustive nor definitive. I will summarise them briefly here:

1. *The inoculation*. ... One immunizes the contents of the collective imagination by means of a small inoculation of acknowledged evil. (1972/2009, p. 178)
2. *The privation of History*. Myth deprives the object of which it speaks of all History. (1972/2009, p. 178)
3. *Identification*. The petit-bourgeois is a man unable to imagine the Other. If he comes face to face with him, he blinds himself, ignores and denies him, or else transforms him into himself. (1972/2009, p. 179)
4. *Tautology*. ... One takes refuge in tautology as one does in fear, or anger, or sadness, when one is at a loss for an explanation: the accidental failure of language is magically identified with what one decides is a natural resistance of the object. (1972/2009, p. 180)
5. *Neither-Norism*. By this I mean this mythological figure which consists in stating two opposites and balancing the one by the other so as to reject them both. (I want *neither* this *nor* that.) ... Here also there is magical behaviour: both parties are dismissed because it is embarrassing to choose between them; one flees from an intolerable reality, reducing it

to two opposites which balance each other only inasmuch as they are purely formal, relieved of all their specific weight. (1972/2009, p. 181)

6. *The quantification of quality.* This is a figure which is latent in all the preceding ones. By reducing any quality to quantity, myth economizes intelligence: it understands reality more cheaply. (1972/2009, p. 181)
7. *The statement of fact.* Myths tend towards proverbs. ... The foundation of the bourgeois statement of fact is *common sense*, that is, truth when it stops of the arbitrary order of him who speaks it. (1972/2009, p. 183)

Barthes' approach has very broad applications. Everything can be a myth, (1972/2009, p. 131), and this is well exemplified in the range of mini essays preceding 'Myth Today'. Although he uses more linguistic terms like 'speech' and 'message', these are understood more as meaning-making as such. Everything can be myth. This does not mean that everything *is* myth, however. In fact, Barthes positions myth as inherently conservative:

There is therefore one language which is not mythical, it is the language of man as a producer: wherever a man speaks in order to transform reality and no longer to preserve it as an image, wherever he links his language to the making of things, metalanguage is referred to a language-object, and myth is impossible. This is why revolutionary language proper cannot be mythical. (1957/2009, p. 173)

Because it is a second-order, parasitical system, myth can only exist by latching onto that which *already* exists. It cannot mythologise that which does not exist at all. Acts of genuine creation and transformation therefore cannot be properly mythical for Barthes. Robert William Guyker Jr. points out that this has implications for the application of Barthesian myth to games:

In connection to a video game world, this might limit or evade possibilities for myth; the more control over the gameworld and its creation, the less opportunity is presented for the Barthesian myth to take hold. The caveat against this assertion is that the gameworld remains virtual, digital, and, therefore, distant from the players' efforts literally to "transform reality." The layer of the image is still very present in the economy and ecology of the interaction. (2016, p. 116)

Play, performance and virtuality are vital to the application of Barthesian myth in games, even if my understanding is not solely Barthesian. In *Image-Music-Text*, Barthes (1977, p. 162) implies that the function of play is the interpretation—not construction—of a sign system, as an alternative to reading. But this stance is worth challenging. I examine the role of play, performance and virtuality more later in this section.

## Myths of mythlessness

Something that I do rule out from my approach and those frameworks which are based on value judgements. For example, understandings of myth that see it as ‘less developed’, an ‘attempted’ but ‘wrong’ account of history or science, or as belonging to ‘primitive man’. These are fundamentally flawed because they are based on a necessarily imperfect, subjective agent who arbitrarily decides who is ‘primitive’, what is ‘wrong’ historically’, and what constitutes being ‘less developed’. Frog points out that such approaches, prominent in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, are based on a “relational deixis” which positions the theorist “as the possessor of true knowledge in contrast to others who have ‘myths’ ... ‘We’ have an implicit authority and superiority as possessors of true knowledge, and our ideology presumes that false knowledge of myth should be discarded and replaced” (2018, p. 7).

An argument which often, but not always, traces similar lines is the claim that myth is of the past and not the present. That at some point in our history we had myth, and now we do not. I also reject this. These arguments tend to rely on one or more faulty assumptions. One is the idea that myth is primitive, and that we are no longer primitive. Another is that something happened to end myth. Eliade, for example, takes both of these views. Regarding the first, he makes a distinction between the modern profane existence and the primitive sacred one (e.g., 1959/1987, p. 14). Regarding the second, Eliade seems to posit mythical time as a phenomenon prior to “the three great religious [sic]—Iranian, Judaic, and Christian—that have limited the duration of the cosmos” (1954/1959, p. 130). For Christianity’s part, this is because Jesus as the son of God is seen as a part of *historical* time, rather than *mythical* time (in the sense of *illo tempore* and *ab origine*) (1959/1987, p. 72). Of Judaism, Eliade argues:

Compared with the archaic and palaeo-oriental religions, as well as with the mythic-philosophical conceptions of the eternal return, as they were elaborated in India and Greece, Judaism presents an innovation of the first importance. For Judaism, time has a beginning and will have an end. The idea of cyclic time is left behind. Yahweh no longer manifests himself in *cosmic time* (like the gods of other religions) but in a *historical time*, which is irreversible. Each new manifestation of Yahweh in history is no longer reducible to an earlier manifestation. (1959/1987, p. 110)

For Iranian religion, it is very similar: “in the Iranian conception, history ... is not eternal; it does not repeat itself but will come to an end one day by an eschatological *ekpyrosis* and cosmic cataclysm” (1954/1959, p. 125). Eliade attributes many of our modern ills to this shift from cyclical (mythic, sacred) to linear (historical, profane) time. He argues that it was only with a cyclical conception of history that “tens of millions of men were able, for century after century, to endure great historical pressures without despairing, without committing suicide or falling into that spiritual aridity that always brings with it a relativistic or nihilistic view of history” (1954/1959, p. 152).

More recently, in his book on myth in society Berger similarly construes myth as something we have stopped producing or engaging with, though makes a very different argument. Although we have a “need for living mythically” (2013, p. 4), Berger claims that we seem to

have stopped producing myths and can only repeat disguised versions of ancient myths. When did this happen, and why? He does not really explain. It seems partly to do with videogames. He asks:

Will “old fashioned” print narratives become obsolete as legions of children and adolescents abandon comic books, fairy tales, myths, and novels to spend all their time watching television, texting one another, and occupying themselves with video games and various game-playing mini-supercomputers like the XBox and PlayStation? (2013, p. 3)

“These questions might seem reasonable”, he says (2013, p. 3). I disagree. Unlike Eliade, there is no theoretical underpinning for why the abandonment of myth has taken place. Nor is there a hypothesis for why such new-fangled media forms as television or videogames should inherently be a part of this disenchantment. But views such as Berger’s are prevalent nonetheless.

Notwithstanding the major criticisms of Eliade’s work in general,<sup>7</sup> as well as my misgivings regarding Berger’s, I do not consider time and its cyclicality or linearity thereof to be definitional of myth (nor the engagement or disengagement of kids and teenagers). The conception of time is significant, yes, but does not alone for me distinguish between mythical and non-mythical. The point here is that divisions between a mythical time and a non-mythical or anti-mythical time tend to either describe a *change* in mythic styles, trends, conventions or media forms, or rely on an unspecified and/or arbitrary point in history at which myth ends and history begins. Seeing myth from a Barthesian perspective is to see it as a *process*, a *mode of expression* rather than an object. As such, myth as a concept in itself is not contingent on any particular time or sociocultural context, even if the character of myth *is* contingent. As Graeber and Wengrow put it, “just as all societies have their science, all societies have their myths” (2021, p. 525). The notion that *we* do not have myth, but *others* do is the faulty “relational deixis” that Frog describes (2018, p. 7), and is what Jewett and Lawrence call the “*myth of mythlessness*” (1977/1988, p. 17). The conviction that we are enlightened and have risen above myth is itself a mythical construction that naturalises certain ideas about progress and certain traits about ourselves compared with others.

## Naturalisation

I began this section with a quotation from Barthes that for me pithily sums up the essence of myth: “it transforms history into nature” (1972/2009, p. 154), “il transforme l’histoire en nature” (1957, p. 202). Another way of putting this might be that the purpose of myth is to disguise discourse as ontology. When we are talking *about* something and associating things with it, this is discourse. But the function of myth is to *naturalise* that discourse such that it

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<sup>7</sup> For one example, some of his readings of ‘archaic’ cyclical rituals of renewal are based on poor translations which mislead Eliade regarding the cyclicalities of the original (Zwi Werblowsky, 1989, p. 131).

appears not as discourse but as fundamental and definitional to the thing we are talking about. Barthes elaborates:

In fact, what allows the reader to consume myth innocently is that he does not see it as a semiological system but as an inductive one. Where there is only an equivalence, he sees a kind of causal process: the signifier and the signified have, in his eyes, a natural relationship. This confusion can be expressed otherwise: any semiological system is a system of values; now the myth-consumer takes the signification for a system of facts: myth is read as a factual system, whereas it is but a semiological system. (1972/2009, p. 156)

Myth is semiosis that pretends not to be semiosis. The problem with history for myth is that it contextualises the ideas, showing that the reason for a particular signification is rooted in contingent factors of the contemporary period. In order to make its object seem natural, a crucial part of naturalisation is not only to *decontextualise*, but *precontextualise*. The myth must appear to predate the circumstances in which it arises, else it is not natural but artificial and arbitrary. I discuss this notion of context and precontextualisation later in this chapter.

This can come dangerously close to ascribing intentionality, however. The author of ‘Death of the Author’ (1967) would surely disapprove. While Barthesian myth can be used in active rhetorical strategy (Bengtson, 2012), in most cases there does not need to be any self-consciousness regarding mythic speech. Indeed, it is more usual that we repeat myths without being aware that they are myths at all—this masking is part of the central function of myth.

## Cycles of myth

How is it that we repeat myths without necessarily being cognizant of their mythicity? I visualise this as a cycle that operates within culture:

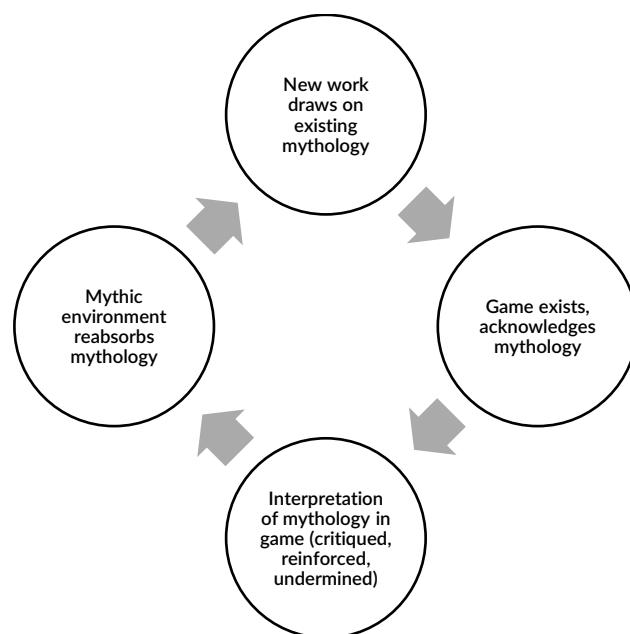


Figure 4. A graphical representation of how myth cycles through game culture.

While this model of the cycle is extremely simplified, it serves as a valuable starting point to iterate from. When we do, say or create things, we draw on our own constellation of values, beliefs, experiences, knowledge and so on. Knowingly or not, this will include the myths that have shaped those aspects. The mythology is part of the process of *development*. By drawing on a myth and using it in a work (or speech act, etc.), we first affirm its existence. When the game exists, we have an *artefact*. Whatever that game does with a given mythology, it first acknowledges its existence. At the level of *interpretation*, we then observe how the game (in our view) uses the mythology: reinforcing it (critically or uncritically), challenging it, undermining it, or what have you. That use then feeds back into the *mythic environment*—simply a shorthand for the swirl of mythologies in a given society as experienced by a given person. Someone else who has been exposed to that use then produces their own work that is (consciously or not) continuing or responding to your work—one mythological use is now a part of another's starting point, their mythic environment from which they draw.

Let's take an example. In the UK in 2015, a Protein World advert attracted controversy. As described in *The Guardian*:

The ad features a black and white, svelte-yet-curvy, fair-haired and fair-skinned woman in a bright yellow bikini. Her hair is long and lush, her lips full, and her waist is tiny. Next to her is the simple question: Are you beach body ready? (Hackman, 2015)

First, this draws on the myth of the *beach body*. This would be the naturalised idea that a body appearing on a beach should be held to 'higher' standards—thinner, fitter and so on. It is presumed that on the beach one will expose more of one's body than in other contexts, and that therefore some special care should be taken in preparation for that. (This itself links into a much broader mythological network revolving around beauty and what constitutes it.) In this case, the advert uncritically reproduces the myth. It positions a stereotypically beautiful body next to the question, "are you beach body ready?". Note that the advert does not explicitly *say* that the body depicted is the only kind that is "beach body ready". But by invoking the myth of the beach body and framing it next to only one kind of body, it quite clearly implies a relation between the two. If the body depicted had not been one stereotypically considered a beach body, then this may be considered a more critical use of the myth, an intentional critique of it. This would leverage our exposure to the myth—we implicitly know what a stereotypical beach body looks like—by subverting our expectations, perhaps causing us to reflect on (for example) why we were surprised to see *that* body implicitly labelled "beach body ready". By instead aligning with our expectations, our preexisting conception of the myth, we can consider this an uncritical reproduction that further reinforces (even if minorly) the myth within the community of recipients. This last step can backfire, however. If a myth is too transparently arbitrary, its disguise and alibi too weak, then it can expose itself as a mythic construction, inviting reflection and critique on it *as mythology*, as this example has at least with readers of *The Guardian*.

The cyclical nature of myth can be seen in the fact that mythologisation is always a process with a past and a future, with the connection between them defined by the present. The cycle is broken either by sufficient political will to interrogate and reimagine a mythology, or a

gradual death over time. For the former, see for example the gains that feminist movements have made in at least the last century by challenging the established myths of gender roles and the family structure (even if there is still a long way to go). For the latter, this is much more gradual and usually with less active intention.

But an important aspect of the cycle I have described is that *affirmation* of the myth is separated from what one *does with it*. By using or acknowledging a mythology at all is to affirm its existence, no matter whether the point of raising it is to critique it or reinforce it. The power of simple affirmation has been much discussed when it comes to ‘debunking’ conspiracy theories or fighting misinformation. Political scientists Brenden Nyhan and Jason Reifler coined the term “backfire effect” in 2010 to describe how “corrections [of misinformation] fail to reduce misperceptions for the most committed participants. Even worse, they actually *strengthen* misperceptions among ideological subgroups” (2010, p. 323). I include the caveats in that quotation (“for the most committed participants” and “among ideological subgroups”) because it is worth noting that, according to Nyhan himself, those conclusions “have often been overstated and oversold” (2018). My point here is neither that pure affirmation is all that matters nor that it does not matter at all, but that it matters at least a bit. More recent studies which doubt the prevalence or strength of the backfire effect do so with a careful account of effective strategies for countering misinformation (e.g., Caulfield, 2020). That is precisely because both aspects—affirmation and use—hold power as separate functions. This is not to say that misinformation or conspiracy theories are the same as myths, rather that they share pertinent similarities in that they are to do with the social and cultural factors that lead to belief in particular ideas or buy-in to particular ideologies.

## Ossification

These mythic cycles turn constantly. Every blog post, ever newspaper article, every novel, every game, every political debate, many of our everyday conversations. Clearly, not all myths are born equal, else we would be drowning in them. Instead, while some myths come and go quickly, others stick for decades, centuries, millennia. And each holds different salience depending on its context. Here I introduce ossification as a metaphor to describe the process by which myths stick around and what happens to the ones that do.

*Ossification* is the process of soft tissue gradually hardening and forming bone. For me, this is a useful metaphor for understanding how myths fluctuate within a broader cultural economy. Myths begin soft and malleable. People do not yet have much stake in the myth. Its parameters, tropes and arguments are not yet set. It can be changed without any great hassle. Over time, however, the myth’s characteristics and features become more well-known and established. People begin building arguments, identities and careers partly on the basis of the myth. Other myths and signs are built *on top* of the myth, using it as a baked-in premise. As a result, it solidifies. The myth is now like bone, both because it has become more rigid in its characteristics and because new flesh now forms around it. The bone then becomes more difficult to access directly because of all the flesh surrounding it, and for the same reason it becomes very difficult to change or affect that myth itself, because it entails a much greater overhaul.

In this way, myths never exist alone in a vacuum, but always part of an infinitely complex system. We have seen already, briefly, how even if we can pick out a ‘single’ myth, it still relies on a whole host of other myths in establishing its premises to be naturalised. By way of example, consider the mythical construction of the dominant system of dating the Anglosphere and the West. Shlomo Sand in his discussion of “cultural time”, as separate from “economic” and “political” time (2017, p. 2), exposes its arbitrary foundation:

I remember having long been amused by the fact that the counting of years and centuries in Western time (the Gregorian calendar) starts from the date of circumcision of an individual born from an encounter between a virgin and the Holy Spirit. (2017, p. 2)

He also picks on the Jewish and Muslim systems of dates, but let us stick with the BC/AD example. BC and AD stand for ‘before Christ’ and ‘*anno Domini [nostri Jesu Christi]*’, ‘in the year of our Lord Jesus Christ’. All time is framed as relative to the birth of Christ. As a mythic system of dating, it works to naturalise the relativisation of time to the foundational Christian event, centring Christianity in our conceptions of time. Over the centuries, this mythic construction has become ossified in two ways. The first is in its fixity. While there is debate surrounding exactly which year Dionysius Exiguus intended to be 1 BC or AD 1, the question is purely academic. The specific numbering of the years is not based on rigorous historical account which would change upon receipt of new evidence. It is fixed symbolically, even if we accept it to be literally doubtful. We would not call 2022 2021 because new evidence comes to light. The second way it is ossified is in the myriad other mythologies built on top of this. Anything which refers to specific BC/AD dates will exemplify this, for example some of the more apocalyptic mythmaking surrounding the year 2000 problem (Y2K).

We can also see this ossification at work in attempts to escape the Christian associations with the dating system. The three most well-known are Common Era, astronomical year numbering and ISO 8601. Each use the same numbering system as BC/AD, but replace or remove the references to Christ. The Common Era system uses BCE, ‘before the Common Era’, and CE, ‘Common Era’, respectively, while both astronomical dating and ISO 8601 use a minus to indicate BC years. While these systems shake off any explicit references to Christ, they notably change the numbering system only very minorly or not at all,<sup>8</sup> electing not to, for example, change to a more scientific fulcrum. To change this system of dating—particularly the predominant system in particular societies—would seem to cause too much upheaval in practical terms but also in cultural terms, where particular associations with particular decades, for example, are both powerful and have widespread buy-in. Processes of ossification could be said to be central to views of myth as discourse, because it is only through discourse that myths can travel from person to person, community to community. The approach of myth as discourse foregrounds this movement and describes how and why certain myths find more purchase and stability than others.

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<sup>8</sup> The Common Era system does not change the numbering system. Astronomical dating and ISO 8601 both introduce a year 0 (which BC/AD and BCE/CE lack, both moving directly from 1 BC to AD 1). This means that all years from 0 and earlier in those systems are offset by one.

## Fossilisation

*Fossilisation* builds from ossification and relies on a much longer time period. Primarily, we can talk about fossilisation when we are considering the reception of mythologies between time-divided cultures. For example, us looking back now at ancient Greek mythology. We can still examine these mythologies within their cultural context—so far as the available evidence allows—but we are aware that they are of another culture.

This is not to ignore that ancient Greek mythology still figures in our societies today, and indeed in societies in the past. Consider the Neoclassical movement, for example. We can have mythologies of how our society relates to another earlier mythology or mythologies. The film *Mission: Impossible 2* (Woo, 2000) features Tom Cruise as Ethan Hunt in an action spy film about a virus called the Chimera virus, and a cure to it called Bellerophon. But for the most part these new contexts for Greek myth are about referencing them for cultural capital, rather than doing anything which would alter the myth itself. Or, it is focused on new ways of understanding the myth—again, not changing it per se. For example, in her recent translation of the Old English poem *Beowulf*, Maria Dahvana Headley (2020) talks about the description of Grendel's mother, and specifically the translation of the word *aglaec-wif*. Rendered in most translations as something like 'wretch', 'hag', 'troll-wife', or 'hell-bride', Headley claims that *aglaec-wif* is simply the feminine form of *aglaeca*, a term used to describe both Beowulf himself as a hero and Grendel as a demon or monster. It could just as easily be translated as 'formidable noblewoman', Headley argues (2020, p. xxv), but it never has been. This simple translation choice clearly has enormous consequences for how we view Grendel's mother, and so interventions like Headley's do much to change our relationship with the poem. But, again, what this alters is our perception of and relationship to it, not what role the myths expressed in *Beowulf* played within its contemporary culture, because that culture is long gone; it is a fossil of a myth.

It is interesting too that the study of fossils in real life uses similar terms to semiotics. Palaeontologists talk about *trace* or *index* fossils, for instance. The distinction between different types of fossils is useful here too for seeing myth through this metaphor. We have access to some mythologies quite directly. For example, accounts of rituals, guidelines for behaviour, evidence of superstitions, surviving manuscripts of stories. Other parts of mythology, however, we have only indirect evidence for. In his retelling of Norse mythic stories, Kevin Crossley-Holland observes:

There are also a number of allusions in ['The Lay of Grimnir'] to individuals and events, such as Odin's deception of the giant Sokkmimir, that are not mentioned anywhere else; they are reminders that what has survived is only a very small proportion of all that once existed. (1980/2018, p. 201)

These aren't only stories which may have existed which are referenced, but "individuals and events" and many more besides. When dealing with fossilised myths, we must be aware that not only are we dealing with a culture and context we do not fully understand, but one where we cannot be sure of the extent we are missing.

Due to the separation in time and culture, fossilised mythologies are fossilised because they are themselves unalterable by us. That is, we may ‘alter’ the fossilised mythology, but only by new evidence or interpretations of how the contemporary society was mythologised, not by our deciding that we wish it to be different (unlike the beach body example, which is a mythology we can change with political will). The fossil can be used as part of other mythologies, related to in different ways, and so on, but remains together as a fossil. Views of myth as a text type and archetype imply, generally speaking, fossilised mythology, and indeed suggest that mythology is *fundamentally* fossilised. Here, I see fossilisation as a process arising instead from the discourse-related ossification process, but over a longer span of time.

## Metonymical icons

“You’re Sherlock Holmes”, says John Watson in the BBC’s *Sherlock*, “wear the damn hat” (Mackinnon, 2016). The construction of Sherlock Holmes and the proliferation of his abstract character in various forms and adaptations is an instructive example here in how certain things such as objects (like a deerstalker hat) become metonymical in relation to mythology, able to invoke it without any explicit reference. Metonyms like this will be reframed as *partials* later, but it is worth discussing them briefly now.

The deerstalker hat is not a fundamental part of Sherlock as a mythic construction, but rather has a metonymical relationship with it. Sherlock is what Joleen Blom describes as an “immaterial character” (2020, p. 84), an abstract form who can be referred to as any of a single specific manifestation (e.g., Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock), the totality of all of them, or none of them. Sherlock is immaterial because we can speak about ‘Sherlock’ without referencing *any* specific Sherlock at all. Blom notes that an immaterial character needs an “indicator”, and the two work bilaterally: “without an indicator to refer to the existence of an immaterial character, the immaterial character will not exist. Vice versa, without an immaterial character to accompany the indicator, the indicator will carry no meaning” (2020, p. 84). For a character like Sherlock, the name functions as an indicator. But that indicator is also “discontinuous”, Blom states (2020, p. 86), meaning that it does not need to be specifically ‘Sherlock Holmes’—Blom gives the examples of Sherlock Hound from Hayao Miyazaki and Kyosuke Mikuriya’s (1984) television series of the same name. The indicator does not need to be linguistic (Blom, 2020, p. 86). In this way, the deerstalker no doubt acts as an indicator for the immaterial character of Sherlock Holmes. It is difficult to imagine any character wearing it without it being a reference to Sherlock—particularly since the hat in question is not very common.

However, it is very possible to produce a convincing Sherlock-type character *without* the deerstalker too. A number of other indicators—more or less subtle—can be used. For example in *House* (Shore, 2004–2012) a number of commonly recurring indicators reference Sherlock. He lives in apartment 221B on Baker Street, his best friend is Dr James Wilson, both men’s names being references (*House* → Holmes, *Wilson* → Watson), and he has a drug addiction (for *House*, Vicodin, while for the original Holmes, cocaine, morphine and tobacco). The deerstalker is perhaps one of the strongest indicators besides the name itself, but the fact that it is not *necessary* tells us that it is not fundamental to Sherlock’s mythic construction,

but metonymical of it. From this we can see that names, traits, objects or other indicators can point to a mythology without necessarily being a fundamental part of it. While the name Sherlock is an indicator that would struggle *not* to invoke the immaterial character Sherlock, something like his drug addiction is an indicator that only references Sherlock within a specific construction or in a specific context—there are plenty of drug-addicted characters who do not recall Sherlock.

## 3.1 Approaching a centre of myth

Having now orbited myth over the past few subsections, describing my theoretical backing and how myth *proliferates* through societies and over time, it is time to close in on a centre of what myth *is*. There is not one ‘correct’ centre, of course, but I must lay out what my understanding of myth is going forward in this project.

*Mythology is constituted of models for understanding the world. It works by framing a set of elements, asserting a natural relation between them and bringing them behind and out of culture.*

A myth is positioned as removed from the level of culture, politics and ideology and is pre-contextualised. It asserts that the connection between its constituent elements is not contingent on any social, political or cultural context, but is instead in some way primordial and natural. Due to the cyclical processes described previously, myth is always in flux and therefore it is difficult to pinpoint and concretise a specific ‘myth’. And this depends on the recipient or interpreter of myth in any case. Therefore, I gravitate more towards terms like mythology—referring to an interconnected system of myths—and mythologisation—which better gets across its processual, fluctuating, unfixed and subjective nature. What constitutes an ‘element’ and how they and the connections between them are identified is expanded on in the rest of this chapter and the following chapter.

Recall the myth of the *self-made billionaire*. With this, we gather several identifiable elements: an *individual*, that individual’s *abilities, traits or talents*, and their *mass of wealth*. In collecting them within a frame, the mythologisation process draws a thread between them. An *individual* with particular and/or sufficient *abilities, traits or talents* can *amass great wealth*. Crucially, as a frame, this implicitly *excludes* that which is not included. By connecting these elements, threading them together causally, and then *also* excluding other potential elements (such as exploitation, the labour of others, luck, inherited wealth, networks and connections, and so on), the myth of the *self-made billionaire* is constructed: an *individual* with *sufficient talent* can or indeed should *amass great wealth*.

In this way, the myth acts as a blueprint or schema. Later we will term this a *decentralised motif* or *decentralised theme*. Different things can populate the abstract categories of *individual, talent*, and so on. Once concretised, these form what will be called a *centralised motif* or *centralised theme*. The *individual* is, of course, whoever the billionaire is. Oprah Winfrey, Kylie Jenner, Alexandre Wang, Rihanna. *Sufficient talent* is populated by the purported means by which that *individual* became rich. For Winfrey, her talent as a talkshow host seen in her charisma, a good sense of what the public cares about, her conversational abilities and so on.

For Jenner, her good sense of style and her business acumen. For most self-made billionaires, this construction usually also includes a strong work ethic (and this in particular is where we can see this myth connect to wider mythologies of labour and what it means to be a good worker). Those two elements are placed in a causal relationship: *because of* her good sense of style and business acumen, Jenner *amassed great wealth*. Situated within the broader mythologies, this myth is positioned as an aspirational one, implying that you too can become rich if only you have a good enough work ethic and play to your talents. The myth here masks the material reality that billionaires are not and cannot be ‘self-made’. Even if one were to reconcile oneself with the requisite exploitation and greed, it is still not even a remotely attainable aspiration. One has to be astronomically lucky, and in almost every case they must be born into that luck.

What is also important to consider in analysing mythology is what else the myth *could have been*, and why then it has taken its present shape. Myth masks material reality, yes, but the contours of that mask can also tell us something about that basic reality and about the society and culture that produced that mask. For example, in a more religious society, we could imagine that instead of the *self-made billionaire*, we have the *divinely ordained billionaire*. ‘Yes, I got ‘lucky’ in acquiring this wealth, but that ‘luck’ is actually God’s grace’. The fact that the *self-made* aspect of this myth is its central assertion tells us that this is a society which champions the individual first and foremost. It also tells us that it champions the idea of social mobility. Core to this myth is that one *made oneself* a billionaire from the starting position of not being a billionaire. When we bear these key assertions in mind and consider what else they could have been, we can more easily see what is being masked: in this case, that many more than this individual were involved in the accrual of wealth, and that the reality of social mobility is not (at the very least solely) dependent on simply pulling oneself up by the bootstraps. “Any man who must say, ‘I am the King’ is no true king” states *Game of Thrones* patriarch Tywin Lannister (Nutter, 2013). “My ‘Not involved in human trafficking’ T-shirt has people asking a lot of questions already answered by my shirt”, jokes comedian Mike Ginn (2013). The reality that the myth asserts corresponds precisely with what the myth aims to mask.

## Context

Myth has a decontextualising impetus. It seeks to remove its object from contingencies and contexts so as to instead feel timeless and universal. We can see the contextual dynamic at work by comparing what kinds of things we do and do not already think of as myth. Here’s a somewhat provocative claim: we have no myths that have a well and widely known, specific point of origin, like an author. Looking at Tolkien is fruitful to illustrate this. When Tolkien writes the material that would later be compiled and published by his son as *The Silmarillion* (1977/2006b), he appears to be consciously and explicitly writing mythology, at least in the early stages. In a letter to the publisher Milton Waldman, Tolkien writes:

Do not laugh! But once upon a time (my crest has long since fallen) I had a mind to make a body of more or less connected legend, ranging from the large and cosmogenic, to the level of romantic fairy-story—the larger founded on

the lesser in contact with the earth, the lesser drawing splendour from the vast backcloths—which I could dedicate simply to: England; to my country. (1977/2006a, p. xii)<sup>9</sup>

However, we do not typically think of *The Silmarillion* as ‘real’ or ‘genuine’ myth. We more readily talk about Tolkien within the context of fantasy fiction rather than British or English mythology. At most, we will say that *The Silmarillion* is written in a mythic register or style. We recognise it more as fiction which *emulates* myth.

This, I argue, is because of its context, its origins. We know that it comes from the mind of Tolkien (even if collated and edited by his son), and we know who Tolkien is. And we know that he *sought* to produce myth. If myth works to decontextualise (or precontextualise), then its origin having specific and documented context undermines that work. What we colloquially think of as myth has no author in the same way. Little is known about Homer, for instance, to the degree that we are not even sure Homer is a single person. And, in any case, we can see that Homer is in large part *retelling* legends which have their origins in oral traditions that date much further back. Similarly, Thomas Malory writes what is seen today as one of the most authoritative Arthurian texts, *Le Morte Darthur* [sic] (1485/2008), yet we are also aware that Arthurian mythology has obscure origins, much further back and much more disparate than this single author.

Tolkien had a sense of this too, using frame stories throughout his works in order to give a sense of a body of mythology penned by many. *The Lord of the Rings* (1955/2007) is framed as Bilbo’s and then Frodo’s work, for example. In the earliest versions of his legendarium, Tolkien envisaged a fictional Anglo-Saxon from the ‘real-world’ Dark Ages called Ælfwine, who purportedly visited the Elves and translated their tales into Old English, which Tolkien now translates into modern English. This may have worked if Ælfwine was a genuine potential author of the tales, rather than an explicit framing story. In other words, specific, contextualised individuals can *contribute* to myth, *engage* with myth, but they cannot *create* it nor *own* it, as their doing so undermines it before it has begun. The myth cannot be primordial if its origin is postordial. They can only emulate that mythmaking process.

Context is perhaps part of the reason why many lament that we no longer produce myths today. But we do, they just come about differently and in different forms. In a culture that, since the Renaissance, has become obsessed with originality, ownership and attribution

<sup>9</sup> Tolkien’s self-deprecation here reflects the fact that *The Silmarillion* was never published in his lifetime due to his doubts about its completeness and robustness as a mythology, and not that he did not write it as myth. In the same letter, he laments that there was far too little myth that he could access, and that very little of it was English, being instead “Greek, and Celtic, and Romance, Germanic, Scandinavian, and Finnish” (1977/2006a, p. xii). Arthurian legend, which might otherwise qualify, is in his view too “imperfectly naturalized, associated with the soil of Britain but not with English; ... its ‘faerie’ is too lavish, and fantastical, incoherent and repetitive” and is far too influenced by Christianity (1977/2006a, p. xii).

The claim that Tolkien intended to write a mythology for England has been argued against by some. Anders Stenström, for instance, argues that Tolkien intended to create “not a mythology: a body of legend” (1995, p. 314). Others argue that, as this letter could also suggest, that was an original intention that he later abandoned, or did not or could not ultimately realise, a “great, unfulfilled project” in Christopher Garbowski’s words (1999, p. 21). Other scholars support the claim, however (Chance, 2004; Cook, 2015; Hostetter & Smith, 1995; Shippey, 2003).

(Quint, 1983)—demonstrated and protected by expansive laws on intellectual property and copyright (Long, 2001, pp. 7–8)—it is nearly impossible for something along the lines of ancient mythic stories to arise and gain traction without its full provenance being traced. Even the meme, a cultural form that has imitation and decentralised proliferation at its core, is painstakingly documented, with websites like *Know Your Meme* seeking to meticulously cite the first occurrences of each meme. It is for this reason that it seems particularly artistic outputs like stories are less likely to seem mythical. That is not to say they do not draw on mythologies, as I have outlined. On the other hand, constructions like the *self-made billionaire* have no discernible origin. Existing in this way without originary context serves to reinforce the myth as being not contingent on contemporary politics, culture and circumstances, but rather some universal, natural truth.

## Emulation

I have mentioned the term *emulation* a few times now and it deserves more precise treatment. Tolkien again serves as a useful example to consider this, as well as constructed languages, which Tolkien is famous for also. Consider—at least for the sake of argument—that Tolkien wrote fantasy fiction in a mythic mode and not ‘genuine’ myth. I would say there is an analogous distinction between *natural* and *constructed* languages, or ‘conlangs’.

According to Christine Schreyer, conlangs are “languages that are consciously developed by an individual or, more rarely, a group rather than through the natural progression of language development and change over time” (2021, p. 328). Schreyer notes that conlangs are typically categorised in two key ways: *how* and *why* they are created (2021, p. 328). The *how* is usually distinguished between *a priori* (made from scratch) and *a posteriori* (built on one or more existing languages). For the *why*, Schreyer offers a number of common aims:

- (a) auxlang (international auxiliary languages), (b) artlang (a language used for artistic purposes, such as media or literature), and (c) engelang (a language developed to test if something is possible in a language, often to make a “better” language than the individual’s own first language) (2021, p. 328)

Esperanto is perhaps the most well-known auxlang, and readers will likely be familiar with popular artlangs like Klingon, Sindarin or Dothraki. *A posteriori* auxlangs like Esperanto proclaim no history *as* Esperanto (at least, not at the point of creation). Rather, Esperanto is, owing to its goals, quite up front about being built on other real-world languages. This is in fact intended to be a benefit of Esperanto, allowing learners to pick it up quickly (although it has been criticised in this regard for being too Eurocentric for its goal of being a *global* auxlang). Artlangs like Tolkien’s Sindarin, however, despite being authored over the course of part of one person’s life, has built into it a series of complex geographic and historical developments. Sindarin is put into geographical and temporal relationships with the other fictional languages of Tolkien’s world, such as Old Sindarin, Quenya and Khuzdul. All of the linguistic developments from Old Sindarin to Sindarin, for example, or the Valarian loanwords used in Quenya, are of course inventions of Tolkien’s, but the effect is to *emulate* a

history. These linguistic changes did not occur naturally over time between speakers of the language, but were decided by Tolkien.

These same processes can occur with mythology. The creation of mythologies can occur *a posteriori* like Esperanto, explicitly and intentionally creating new mythologies based on a synthesis of others. We might consider the Marvel Cinematic Universe an example of this—it does not try to hide the fact that it is an amalgamation of not only different superhero worlds, but also (and partly because of that) an amalgamation of more traditional mythologies. Or mythologies can be created *a priori*, an attempt at a wholly new, nonderivative mythology. The latter was Tolkien's mission. (Inevitably, of course, such attempts are nonetheless influenced by other mythologies, such as Tolkien by Celtic, Norse and Finnish, but the difference is in the intention or goal.) In either case, though, we are aware that in its intentionality, in its context and situated history, it cannot be the 'real' thing.

This 'artificiality' may fade over time, however. The original context fades from memory and at the same time the mythology continues developing, becoming more embedded in society and following that ossifying cycle. Arguably, this has happened with Tolkien. Emma Vossen (2020) traces the history of Tolkien's immense, near-ubiquitous influence in fantasy, and from fantasy to *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax & Arneson, 1974) and from there into videogames. The influence has been such that, Vossen claims, contemporary videogames "manifest a tension between fidelity to the Middle Ages as an actual time period and fidelity to what we imagine as medieval thanks to source texts such as *LOTR* and *Dungeons and Dragons*" (2020, p. 50). That Tolkien's 'conmyth' has proven so influential over the last decades that it has fundamentally and often unconsciously shaped our view of the Middle Ages as a whole speaks to this process of ossification. We may think similarly of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. While it began in that form in 2008 with the film *Iron Man* (Favreau, 2008), it of course draws from the longer lineage of Marvel Comics. Like many more or less unified bodies of mythology, Marvel has a wide range of figures and stories penned by many (many of them unknown or uncredited) and without necessarily having narrative coherence.

## Medium specificity

Despite myth's decontextualising function, we know that its object is contextual and contingent. Mythic discourse and the proliferation of myth is also shaped and afforded by medium. I explore this concept in more depth in the later in '5.1 A literature review of heroic thinking', but Walter J. Ong's notion of the *heavy hero* illustrates this point. Ong argues:

The heroic and marvelous had served a specific function in organizing knowledge in an oral world. With the control of information and memory brought about by writing and, more intensely, by print, you do not need a hero in the old sense to mobilize knowledge in story form. (1982/2002, p. 69)

Essentially, due to the constraints that orality imposes, myths in that medium need to be memorable. Ancient stories that have survived until today have likely done so because they were the most memorable, and so could survive until they were written. Ong argues that these constraints lend themselves to "persons whose deeds are monumental, memorable and

commonly public” (1982/2002, p. 68), with heroes who are defined by one or two central traits and little else, with potential nuances being lost over the many retellings.

This comparison between the affordances and constraints of oral versus written storytelling is just one example of how the specificities of a medium shape how mythology is produced and cycled over time. Indeed, the prominence of primarily narrative media like novels and films and their specificities could perhaps explain why so many see myth as story. Our most prominent media afford stories, and so these encounters with myth may be mediated accordingly. This is important for the application to games because they have different affordances and constraints than other forms.

## Space

Space can often be central to mythology. Richard Slotkin (1992) describes mythic space as “a pseudo-historical (or pseudo-real) setting that is powerfully associated with stories and concerns rooted in the cultures’ myth/ideological tradition. It is also a setting in which the concrete work of contemporary myth-making is done” (1992, p. 234). Slotkin’s understanding here has been applied to games by Stefan Aguirre Quiroga (2022) through the lens of white mythic space, arguing that the backlash to *Battlefield 1*’s (DICE, 2016) inclusion of nonwhite combatants in its World War One setting can be understood through the notion that there is a particular mythic construction of the setting that excludes certain kinds of people. ‘Setting’ in the way used here by Slotkin and Aguirre Quiroga is more general than space, referring also to time and circumstances. But it gets at something important: we can imagine spaces in particular ways that makes certain elements seem naturally at home there and others not, regardless of accuracy or reality. Aguirre Quiroga, for example, notes that in discussions of historical accuracy, the race of participants seems to be called into question alarmingly often, “overlooking considerable more fantastical inclusions”, in spite of “the fact that the historical record and modern historical scholarship acknowledges their presence” (2022, p. 2). The mythologisation of space is one of the ways in which this can happen: certain elements—even very fantastical ones—can seem totally normal and go unquestioned, while others seem to stick out, unwelcome. When we enter a mythologised space, the rules, customs and relations change.

Frog’s (2020) theorisation of the *otherworld* and *otherworlding* is useful in developing this further. Frog observes that the otherworld is difficult to define. In various contexts, the otherworld can be a physical, geographic space one can visit, like a graveyard or Lapland. It can be a separate world entirely, like Middle Earth. It can be a mirror world, as in Celtic Otherworld (variously called Annwn, Avalon, Tír na nÓg, Mag Mell, Emain Ablach and more). It can be not a different place, but a “level of perception” (2020, p. 455), such as the ability to see the ghosts that are with us right now, an overlapping world. This proves challenging for anyone attempting to define the otherworld. Frog sidesteps this by verbing the term instead:

*Otherworlding* is a process of othering linked to places and spaces, contrasting “ours” or “the familiar” with “other.” Commensurability is again salient: the familiar or recognizable forms a frame of reference against which fractions of difference become emphasized. (2020, p. 458)

In this way, for Frog, we can link the same process by which we inhabit different roles at grandma's house compared with the normal family home (assuming, of course, that the two are different), compared with how an alternative club changes our social relations, with how the time of day or year changes how we relate to a place, and all the way to what we may more typically think of as an *otherworld*, such as a fairyland, the Celtic Otherworld, Avalon, some sort of spirit world, and so on. Commensurability is, as Frog says, key: the ways in which the otherworld *differs* are “reciprocally informative about the in-group’s values, ideas, and relations to places”, though it is important to bear in mind that excluding sameness as a result can also be reductive (2020, p. 458).

For Frog, otherworlding and mythologisation are not one and the same nor dependant on one another but do have significant overlap:

Pervasiveness of otherworlding in a community, ranging in form from telling stories to embodied behaviour, can lead even the most fantastic ideas to become accepted as simply “the way things are.” Roland Barthes (1972) described this process as *naturalization* ... It can also be described as *mythologization*—that is, discourse produces a living mythology of the way things in the world are and how they work ... Mythologization describes the process of establishing such models of the world through discourse—that is, through people talking about things, representing them, and doing things—irrespective of empirically based scientific knowledge. (2020, pp. 467–468)

Mythologisation as a part of otherworlding is what establishes the different rules of the otherworld as natural, as not seeming constantly and obviously incongruent or arbitrary. But, Frog notes, separate processes of mythologisation can occur with regards to the same otherworld: “parents may have a very skewed image of environments where teenagers hang out” (2020, p. 468). For this reason, Frog argues that otherworlding “may produce the type of stories and descriptions called legends”:

That is, short accounts about a specific encounter that are developed on a traditional plot or motif and that engage contestable beliefs. Legends become a medium for knowing what kinds of things happen in a certain place, or norms of behaviour there. Once otherworlding has undergone mythologization, it easily becomes taken for granted in relevant groups ... Otherworlding is then not about convincing people about a place but rather maintaining understandings that other people might contest. (2020, p. 468)

An otherworld is a space in which the rules change. We observe different behaviour, occupy different roles and relations, and different kinds of actions become permissible or impermissible. What these changes are exactly is communicated in a variety of ways, including stories, superstitions, characters, rituals and so on.

Sometimes this otherworld is accessible—a teenager’s bedroom or a club at night. Other times, whether it is accessible is a matter of belief—most religious otherworlds, for example. In other cases, there is no belief or pretence that the otherworld is accessible. This manifests in two ways. The first is in fiction, whereby the otherworld is an emulated otherworld. That

is, it is accessible within the fictional world, but we have no illusion that it is accessible outside of that world. Within the fictional reality, it functions otherwise as expected. The second is the otherworld as thought experiment. Of course, the two can also mix. Atlantis, for example, is a fictional otherworld used by Plato as a theoretical contrast to ancient Athens, whereby the Atlanteans lose favour with the gods and their city is sunk into the sea.

Space has long been seen as vital to digital games. Games researcher Espen Aarseth famously claimed in 2001 that “the defining element in computer games is spatiality. Computer games are essentially concerned with spatial representation and negotiation” (2001a, p. 154). There is a crucial difference here between the space of games and the space of literature or film, for example. Frederik Bakkerud observes that Aarseth’s (1997) important concept of ergodicity—the requirement for “nontrivial effort” in the traversal of the text (1997, p. 1)—“is not contingent on visual signifiers, or digital screens for that matter, but on a topological structure in the material object” (2022, p. 1). For Bakkerud, “this spatiality, it follows, is not merely metaphoric” (2022, p. 1). This idea builds on Aarseth’s (2001b, 2007) elucidation of the ‘virtual’ in games in contrast to fictionality. Aarseth uses the example of doors in *Return to Castle Wolfenstein* (Grey Matter Interactive, 2001):

Most of the doors are merely textures on the walls that look like doors, but whose function is purely decorative. Other doors actually do behave in a door-like manner; they can be opened, closed, seen through, walked through and fired through. (2007, p. 42)

He concludes based on this that while the first type of door is fictional and equivalent to those in novels, paintings, films and so on—they *represent* doors but are not *actually* doors—the second type of door is not, because it actually functions. But it also cannot be considered ‘real’, because it is contained within the gameworld, so a third category—virtual or simulated—is needed (2007, p. 42).<sup>10</sup>

This has important implications for mythologies of space as, through and in games. Although we think of games as fictional, they are not like other fiction. When an otherworld is created in a game, we are not only told about it, as by the author of a novel, say. In a *fictional* world, in Aarseth’s sense, “the reader/viewer can only experience what the author/designer explicitly permits” (2001b, p. 229). When I read *The Lord of the Rings*, I can use my imagination to try to fill in the gaps, such as what a particular village is like. When I play *Lord of the Rings Online* (Standing Stone Games, 2007), I can go there and see for myself. This particular example is used by Aarseth to describe *ludoforming*, “turning a contemporary, historical or fictional landscape into a gameworld” (2019, p. 127). In *Lord of the Rings Online*: “the areas which are ludoformed represent a selection of the novel’s core landscape” and, of those areas represented, “the distances are shrunk to such a degree that the 200-mile road from Bree to Rivendell can be traversed on horse in ten minutes in the game” (2019, p. 133). The way in which a ludic topology is traversable can reveal a great deal about what is deemed important in the game. In *Lord of the Rings Online*, it is not important that I travel from Bree to Rivendell

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<sup>10</sup> Stefano Gualeni et al. (2021) in their browser-based philosophical game explore the question of doors and virtuality in much more detail.

in an amount of time faithful to the novels; the organising structure of the game tells me that that is not a *meaningful* part of its overall structure. In *Death Stranding* (Kojima Productions, 2019), however, although the entirety of the United States is (unsurprisingly) not represented, the fact that long and arduous traversals of space are made necessary and afforded suggests that distance *is* a meaningful part of the game.

Distance and scale are not the only factors either. I have written previously (Ford, 2019b) about how the way in which games separate different areas from each other through borders and how the game incentivises and structures crossing those borders is meaningful, particularly in connection with the structure of quests. For example, in a quest structure revolving around a central hub, that central hub being also spatially central reinforces its importance within the gameworld. Essentially, the topology of gameworlds is not incidental, but can in itself communicate meaning with regards to the model of understanding instantiated within the gameworld.

## Time

We predominantly think of time as chronology. Time is a linear dimension where the present is a point (*now*) and relative to it are all those points prior (*the past*) and all those after (*the future*). The future does not yet exist and so is speculative; the past did exist but no longer does, and so can only be remembered but not reaccessed. Time is linear, continuous and regular. It does not stop, speed up for slow down, but progresses only forwards at a constant pace which we can then measure objectively in seconds, minutes and so on.<sup>11</sup> As I have outlined, myth works through time, changing, ossifying, fossilising or fading. But myth also works *with* and *on* time. Both the past as not reaccessible and the future as speculative provide fertile ground for mythologisation.

## Chronos and kairos

Time works differently in games than in the real world. In the real world, time is a constant. Or, even if that is not entirely true, at the very least it is not in any significant way manipulable. In games, time is instantiated as an aspect of design like anything else. Some games like *Animal Crossing* (Nintendo EAD, 2001) use real-world time. But even then, actions within the game do not take as long as they would in real life, and players may manipulate the console's system clock to 'trick' the game. Most games work on an internal regular temporality, representing a day–night cycle for instance. But again, actions are not usually tuned to the time they would take in real life. We can pause the game. We can fast-travel. Sometimes there are time-travelling mechanics. And so on. In some important ways, the manifestation of time in games resembles that of mythic time, where time is manipulable, pliable to the model of understanding the world being communicated. A useful starting point is to examine the different forms or modes of time that have been theorised.

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<sup>11</sup> Of course, we have become aware over the last century or so that this is not quite the case when the physics is more deeply examined, but here I refer to the way in which time is perceived, measured and used in the vast majority of circumstances today.

Felix Ó Murchadha analyses Martin Heidegger's understanding of time, arguing that it can be seen as a "split ... between chronological and kairological time" (Ó Murchadha, 2013, p. 3). Ó Murchadha explains:

'Chronos' and 'kairos' are two Greek words for that which is called 'time' in English, 'Zeit' in German and 'temps' in French. 'Kairos' is a qualitative concept of time, which means the opportune point in time: the opportune time to do something, the right time to act. 'Chronos', on the other hand, is for the most part a quantitative concept of time. ... We experience chronos as continuity and Kairos as a moment of vision—*Augenblick*—that breaks with the continuity, as an other time, as a time which is opportune for action in the emphatic sense. (2013, pp. 3–4)

In Christian theology, this usually refers to moments of God's will being fulfilled. For example, in Mark 1:15 in Greek, the term *kairos* (καιρός) is used, and an English translation of the verse reads: "And saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe the gospel'" (*Interlinear Bible: Mark 1:15*, n.d.). This has important implications for Christian eschatology. The end times understood as *kairos* become not a certain, quantifiable date, but "a qualitative time that exists in a synchronic and endless dimension beyond the circle of worldly time for chronology" (Yoon, 2021, p. 10). Along similar lines, Sunny Yoon argues that "digital games create a new dimension of time in shifting the rules of games away from the chronological order prevalent in the narratives of conventional media and literature" (2021, p. 10). With that said, it is certainly not the case that other media use strictly chronological time. *The Simpsons* (Groening, 1989–2022–present), for example, uses a malleable construction of time whereby events can occur and time can pass, but not for everyone and everything at once, and at different paces (Davis et al., 2015). Bart has not aged since 1989, while Apu and Manjula had octuplets who were born and grew into toddlers before then freezing in time, and different presidents have appeared over the years, reflecting real-world chronology.

Nonetheless these forms of nonchronological temporality appear in games in particular ways, usually tied directly to the player rather than to a number of different points like in *The Simpsons*. Consider a game like *Skyrim*, an example I consider later in more detail (though the same will apply to many openworld roleplaying games). You walk by a farm and a distraught farmhand runs up to you. He says, 'please, you've got the help! Bandits are attacking, and they'll take everything!'. In the distance behind him, you see a few well-armed bandits. You receive a new quest in your log and, taken in by the urgency of the farmhand's plea, you charge the bandits and save the day. However, if instead of fighting the bandits immediately you accepted the quest but continued walking, what would happen? In many of these games, nothing. Time on the farm would appear to freeze. Despite the farmhand's desperation, the actual trigger in the game logic for the bandits beginning their raid is the player's approach. I could ignore the request, complete everything else in the game and return to the farm, and the bandits would still be there waiting, and the farmhand would still be in dire straits. This would be a baffling series of events in *Skyrim* the film, but in *Skyrim* the game it is totally

ordinary and hardly remarked on in most analyses. Yoon understands this mode of ludic temporality through *kairos*:

Digital games open up synchronic time and an everlasting present tense by dismantling routines and the chronological order of time. ... Game players engage in repetitive tasks, acting as narrative creators in the nexus of synchronic time wherein proto-time and end times merge together in emulation of omnipresent divinity in biblical texts. (2021, p. 13)

*Skyrim* is a world full of opportune moments frozen in chronological time, made into the ‘right’ moment when the player deems it. What these moments are and certain other parameters surrounding them are predetermined, but the player has some kairotic control over when the moment is right for them. This is not always the case. In *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (Warhorse Studios, 2018), the game’s internal representation of time is more chronological, proceeding regardless of what the player does and allowing some quests (notably not all, however) to fail as a result. But the *Skyrim*-style time will be familiar to players of open-world roleplaying games.

It is no coincidence too that such games are almost always structured around quests. Aarseth (2005, p. 498) construes quests in three basic types: place-oriented, time-oriented and objective-oriented. But these refer to the quest-internal features, such as a time-oriented quest requiring the player to stay alive for a certain duration. Benjamin James Marshall Horn (2021) discusses time in relation to quests in more detail, but this is also a primarily quest-internal distinction between game time and fictional time, drawing on Jesper Juul (2004). When Aarseth discusses the organisation of quests together, he focuses only on space, arguing that “quest and space are intrinsically linked” (2005, p. 499). I do not disagree, but there is also much to be gained from a temporal focus. Time with regards to the overall network of quests in a game structures these kairotic moments. Particularly in openworld games, what is important is order, or sequence. Some quests may require other quests to have been completed as a prerequisite, or indeed some quests become unavailable after certain other quests are completed. Some sequences of quests may have to be completed in a specific order. These temporal—but not chronological—structures also afford and restrict the player in particular ways.

## The mythic past

We can remember and document the chronological past pretty well in many cases. But the past can never be grasped in its entirety. I may have a video recording of me eating my breakfast. (I don’t—that would be weird—bear with me.) This recording serves as sufficient proof for most reasonable observers that the event did occur in the past. We can see what I ate, how I ate it, perhaps when I ate it, what I was wearing, what my outward reaction to the food was, and so on. But even such a detailed recording does not provide the full reality of the actual occurrence. It is always incomplete information. These gaps in knowledge combined with memories of the past are open to mythologisation. You’ve seen the recording of me eating breakfast, but I wax lyrical about how perfectly toasted my toast was, how beautifully runny my eggs were. These are sensations not captured by the camera nor by any

other documentary evidence of the event, and you have only my word to go on. I feel this way about this breakfast so strongly that I now compare all future breakfasts to it and, to my despair, find them lacking. Perhaps in the moment itself, it was in fact a relatively ordinary breakfast, but now it has been mythologised into *the Perfect Breakfast*. The empirical moment in time itself becomes almost incidental. I may even forget which day it was or what I was doing that day, or misremember it. All that remains in the myth of *the Perfect Breakfast*.

On a slightly grander scale, consider that many of our heroic epics are not about contemporaneous heroes, but about a long-lost, nearly forgotten mythical age. The heroes of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were not contemporaneous with Homer's 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE ancient Greece, they were Mycenaean, at least 200 years prior. Even if, as I have noted, Homer is not the originator of these stories, but rather the most enduring scribe of an otherwise oral tradition, why should these stories of old heroes be both remembered now, and not 'updated' to be heroes of the contemporary moment? The Old English poem *Beowulf* begins with a call to remember the heroes *in geardagum*, the days of yore. What we have of the Arthurian cycle is largely written between the 12<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, but concerns a king of England sometimes around the middle of the first millennium. We may also recognise this construction more generically. *Once upon a time* is a signifier of this mythic past, sometime in the past but an undefinable past. In many ways, it signifies a movement into an otherworld in which we expect the rules to change and for things to work differently (Frog, 2020). A *long time ago in a galaxy far, far away...* With these words we are transported to a separate time and space, at once specific and undefined.

This is what we could call a *mythic past*. It is the separation of the mythologisation of the past into a separate temporality with different rules. This is often associated with creation myths, fitting with Eliade's definitions that myth "relates a sacred history, that is, a primordial event that took place at the beginning of time, *ab initio*", is "the history of what took place *in illo tempore*", and that "to tell a myth is to proclaim what happened *ab origine*" (1959/1987, p. 95). *Ab initio*, *in illo tempore* and *ab origine* are all ways of talking about a time-before-time: something which happened 'in the past', but a past which cannot be placed in rational chronology. We can say that the cosmogenesis occurred *in the past*, before *now*, but we cannot say that it happened 'in the year x'. In part, this is because for Eliade such mythic time "is neither homogenous nor continuous" (1959/1987, p. 68). Distinguishing between "profane duration and sacred time", Eliade remarks:

*By its very nature sacred time is reversible* in the sense that, properly speaking, it is a *primordial mythical time made present*. Every religious festival, any liturgical time, represents the reactualization of a sacred event that took place in a mythical past. (1959/1987, pp. 68–69)

Though my understanding of myth itself differs greatly from Eliade's, there are important overlaps in this temporality. Recall my discussion of context and how myth works to *decontextualise* or *precontextualise* that which it frames and naturalises. I used this primarily with regards to a myth's origin—who produced, wrote, spoke, uttered, created, etc. it—but it also says something about the myth itself. Myth must seem at once *of our time and timeless*. Of our time, because for it to be repeated and used in the cycle I described and ossified, it must

say something relevant or salient about how we live today. It must in some way *ring true*. Timeless, because the myth's power and salience comes from the fact that it is at the same time not contingent on *now*. Because the myth purports to explain and be the reason for something, it must predate it and not rely on it. Myth must be above the fray, in that sense. In this way, the mythic time of especially cosmogenic myths, but also of various golden ages and heroic ages and so on, is mythic because it is acontextual, noncontingent, existing *outside* of the relation and construction it tries to form and explain.

This kind of deep mythic past—often but not always cosmogenic—lies in an unreachable past, so distant that the chronology leading from then to now has not and cannot be reconstructed. This has also been called a *time abyss* (Clute & Grant, 1999, pp. 946–947), usually occurring in moments of realisation (such as the discovery of an inscrutable artefact) that there is a mysterious gap in time between an important *then* and *now*. Mark J. P. Wolf argues that “a time abyss instead calls attention to itself as a gap, its enormity raising more questions than it answers, generating speculation, specifically as to how the world moved from the former state to the current one” (2012, p. 166). If the mythic past is an ideal to which we nostalgically want to return, then the time abyss which plunges that past into deep, inscrutable time beyond the measurement of chronology obscures exactly how that change from then to now happened. The progression becomes a black box where we can see the input (let's say an ideal mythic past) and the output (our suboptimal present), but not how the former descended into the latter. This invites speculation, which usually proceeds by attempting to contrast something perceived in the mythic past which is now lost and positioning that as the core reasoning. It is not coincidental, for example, that Edward Gibbon's (1776–1789) famous work examines why the Roman Empire declined and fell. In an era highly nostalgic for ancient Rome, it was of paramount importance to understand how (European) society went from this ideal through the time abyss of the so-called Dark Ages to the present day and its perceived ills. Indeed, the Dark Ages as a time abyss was constructed specifically to favourably contrast the contemporary Enlightenment period with Rome as its nostalgic object, compared with the post-Western Roman Empire Middle Ages in Europe (noted as least as early as Mommsen, 1942).

The mythologisation of the past may also be thought of differently than only this conception of deep, mythic time. As I have examined, Frog dissects the broad concept of the *otherworld* and reconfigures it into a verb, which will be a useful template for doing the same with the creation of a mythic time. Again, Frog states:

*Otherworlding* is a process of othering linked to places and spaces, contrasting “ours” or “the familiar” with “other.” Commensurability is again salient: the familiar or recognizable forms a frame of reference against which fractions of difference become emphasized. (2020, p. 458)

We could describe mythic time in a similar way, as an *othertime* and therefore as a process of *othertiming*, the creation of a separate temporality in which things work differently to now. In the context of the past, this would be constructing the idea that this place *used to be* other than it is now. This *used to be* does not have to be based on any empirical assessment of how that place at one point functioned. Rather, this is how we might see the construction

of the ‘good old days’. We have all encountered those who lament the loss of the good old days but with a description of said days that does not in any way match reality. This is nostalgia for an ideal separated from us by time rather than space. In *Beowulf*, the heroes of *geardagum* inhabited the same lands as those of the poem. In Homer, we hear not of faraway heroes, but familiar places (even if also abroad). A *here* which was once full of heroes and gods, but whose presence now exists only in ruins and remnants.

## Nostalgia, apocalypse and postapocalypse

Typically, this mythic past is looked on nostalgically. Cultural theorist Svetlana Boym links this nostalgic tendency to the proliferation and domination of linear, irreversible time (2001, p. 13). She argues that over the last two centuries, as a development from the Renaissance, the notion of “Progress” has been “applied to everything—from time to space, from the nation to the individual” (2001, p. 10). As timeless and universal as nostalgia seems now, Boym identifies it as a distinctly modern—and therefore contingent—condition. She notes that the term first came about in the 17<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>12</sup> and was seen as a “curable disease”, eventually transforming into today’s “incurable modern condition” (2001, p. xiv). Boym notes further that nostalgia is fundamentally about time:

At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. In a broader sense, nostalgia is a rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition. (2001, p. xv)

That evocative phrase “to revisit time like space” is vital. Repetition also is fundamental to mythology. Without it, myth cannot proliferate and ossify, and cannot spread to escape its contingent roots. Mythology must always be revisited, even if each visit is slightly different. Boym notes that nostalgia can become particularly dangerous. “It is the promise to rebuild the ideal home that lies at the core of many powerful ideologies of today, tempting us to relinquish critical thinking for emotional bonding” (2001, p. xvi). The mythic past was a *better* time, perhaps an *ideal* time, a time to which now can be unfavourably compared.

It is therefore hopeful in a certain conservative way: things were better, so if we do things like we did then, things will be better again. Of course, that bygone era can never be empirically realised, only nostalgically constructed and used to foster emotional bonds that override critical thinking, to borrow Boym’s terms. The past being imagined never existed, and so a reconstruction is actually a construction that uses a mythologised past to provide a natural justification for its construction. In this way, the nostalgic mythic past is better understood through what it is created in reaction or contrast to. Like otherworlding, the key is

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<sup>12</sup> *Nostalgia* was coined in 1688 by the Swiss physician Johannes Hofer (Fuentenebro de Diego & Valiente Ots, 2014).

in the word ‘other’. Creating a mythic past is about imagining an *othertime* when things were done differently as a way of reacting to the present.

For this reason, the apocalypse and postapocalypse are particularly interesting, not least because so many games imagine a postapocalyptic future. The apocalyptic event represents a rupture so sudden and traumatic that the mythic past is imagined pessimistically, without even that conservative hope. The *Fallout* series (1997–2018) imagines an alternative, nuclear-powered 1950s and then irrevocably destroys it, leaving a nostalgia without hope of fulfilment. The previous kind of mythic past I described is used to say, ‘things are bad, but if we go back to the old ways they can be good again’. The kind of postapocalypse *Fallout* depicts says, ‘things are very, very bad, and we can’t ever go back’. This forces a reckoning: either this postapocalyptic world exists in that perpetual pessimism, or the mythic past is relinquished and a new future forged.

Yoon (2021) also argues that the apocalypse is primarily connected to kairotic time and so finds a structural affinity with games. This is because the “end times in Christian eschatology and biblical apocalypse are clearly envisioned as a function of kairos (not kronos) in the New Testament” (2021, p. 10). “Games introduce synchronic and ubiquitous time, similar to ubiquitous and omnipresent kairos time as told in biblical stories and Greek mythology” (2021, p. 12), Yoon argues, concluding that players play in “the nexus of synchronic time wherein proto-time and end times merge together in emulation of omnipresent divinity in biblical texts” (2021, p. 13). The generality of these claims combined with the Christian lens perhaps stretches the argument too far, but the connection between *kairos* and the end times in the context of games is worth exploring.

Consider *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo EPD, 2017). Calamity Ganon has already inflicted an apocalypse of sorts on the land, leaving it largely desolate and sparsely populated, but threatens yet further apocalypse. Upon defeating him at the end of the game and watching the final cutscene, the player is returned to their savefile as it was just before they fought Calamity Ganon. While there is a narrative end to the game given in the cutscene, ludically the player exists in the perpetual eve of apocalypse, able only to avert it over and over again. In *The Legend of Zelda: Majora’s Mask* (Nintendo EAD, 2000), the player likewise inhabits a world about to be destroyed by a crashing moon. The game revolves around the three days prior to this apocalypse, rewinded and replayed over and over again until the player decides finally, kairotically, to confront the power behind it. These apocalyptic cycles pervade *Legend of Zelda* games (see Hemmann, 2021 for a Buddhist perspective on these apocalyptic cycles). The ludic-kairotic apocalypse also pervades many other games besides. More often than not, the player chooses when to begin the final quest, when to face the apocalypse. In this sense, they also bring it upon the world—if the player did nothing, nothing would happen. In *Skyrim*, the player must choose to enter Sovngarde to finally take on Alduin. In *Horizon Zero Dawn*, the player may take all the time in the world to complete sidequests and collect things in preparation for the final quest, the apocalyptically titled ‘The Face of Extinction’. Upon completing the quest, the player is sent back to before they began the quest, similarly to *Breath of the Wild*.

In this way, the apocalypse and postapocalypse in games are often less a function of events outside one’s control—like the Christian end times, decided by God, or climate

catastrophe, too large an issue for most individuals to avert by their own actions—and more a function of the player’s kairotic experience of the gameworld. The apocalypse exists *for* the player. The postapocalypse provides the basis for a world of upheaval in which the player can affect radical change, but always in the shadow of a nostalgic, mythic, preapocalyptic and therefore irretrievable past.

## The mythic future

The apocalypse and postapocalypse segue naturally into the mythic future, because they are intimately concerned with both past and future. The future is defined by speculation. With the past, documentary evidence can exist that establishes empirically certain information about it. With the future, no such evidence exists. The closest in terms of empiricism is found in sophisticated models, forecasts and predictions. This speculative nature invites the construction of the future, and these constructions may undergo mythologisation. The task of mythology is to disguise this speculation as certainty.

The run-up to the Iraq War in the early 2000s is a good example of this. In the UK, the speculation that Saddam Hussein may have been in possession of weapons of mass destruction became codified in the infamous September Dossier (British Government, 2002), which crystallised into headlines like *The Sun*’s “BRITS 45mins FROM DOOM” (Pascoe-Watson, 2002). The speculation, the threat, had already become a certainty which demanded immediate, drastic action. From the other side of the pond, philosopher Brian Massumi (2010) notes the self-actualisation of threat, exemplifying it with the justifications for the Iraq War. “If we feel a threat, there was a threat. Threat is affectively self-causing” (2010, p. 54). As such, this felt reality “legitimises preemptive action … preemptive action will always have been right” (2010, p. 54). George W. Bush’s logic at the time, Massumi argues, was based on the *double conditional* that arises from this seemingly circular logic:

[Bush] was right even though Saddam did *not* have the capacity, because Saddam “would have if he could have.” The case remains open. At any moment in the future, he could have acquired the means, and as soon as he could, he would. Would have, could have: double conditional. (2010, p. 55)

While the actual *fact* would have been that Hussein *has* weapons of mass destruction, Massumi notes that Bush’s logic works two steps back from that: the first step that Hussein *could* have WMDs, and the second that he *would* have WMDs if he ever *could*. That this last step is entirely speculative and impossible to prove does not matter, Massumi argues, because “the felt reality of the threat is so superlatively real that it translates into a felt certainty about the world” (2010, p. 55). Or, in my terms here, speculation and threat can become mythologisations of the future whereby that future becomes not possible but certain. The future already exists.

Utopia and dystopia must also come in with regards to the mythologisation of the future. I cannot hope to do these vast topics justice here, of course, so I will focus only on a number of the most immediately relevant points.

Just like the mythic past, mythic futures are constructed only in relation to the present. This “creates a *tension* between how things are and how things could be” (Farca, 2019, p. 107).

We imagine an othertime in which things work differently than they do now; with *utopia*, this is implicitly aspirational. Utopia as a mythic construct is the masking of *should* as *could*. ‘Society *could* be like this’, the utopian says, implying but not stating their belief that it *should* be like this. The presentation of utopia also presumes that *could*, foreclosing the discussion of possibility. This is no doubt a generalisation—utopia can also be a self-reflective, critically grounded and open exercise. But utopia constructs a vivid image of a possible future, forcing us to consider *this* possible future rather than any other, and baking into its existence as an image the premise that such a future is possible. Dystopia works similarly: it is othertime-as-threat. A possible future is constructed with the unspoken premise that it is possible, and used as a threat whereby to avoid that threat a different path must be taken in the present. Indeed, dystopia as a mythic future can be constructed as a countermyth to a utopia, asserting that “the dream of Utopia, however noble it initially was, is fragile and may easily turn into a vicious nightmare if not treated with caution” (Farca, 2018, p. 67). It can attempt to naturalise fragility and doubt within the utopian mythology itself. In this way, however, utopia and dystopia can be seen as “almost correlative in their function” (F. Vieira, 2013, p. 1), two sides of the same coin. Both aim to affect decisions made in the present by constructions of the future; one is the carrot and the other the stick.<sup>13</sup>

The same is true of videogame utopias and dystopias. Of the videogame dystopia, Gerald Farca writes that it “virtualises a negative society that foregrounds the problems of the designers’ and players’ empirical reality” (2018, p. 120), and later suggests that this is reversible (2019, p. 103). Playing dystopia, Farca contends, works in a utopian way:

By sending the player on a journey through hell but retaining a hopeful (utopian) core, it involves her in a *playful trial action (or test run)* in which she may test, track, and explore in detail an estranged gameworld and an alternative societal model through imaginative and ergodic means. This venture into the fictional reality of dystopia shows potential to warn the player about negative trends within empirical reality and to explore emancipatory routes that may transform the gameworld. (2018, p. 16)

The purpose of game dystopias is partly threat, but as a playable simulation also allows the player to work towards their own emancipation from the dystopia. Most of the time, playing in a dystopian gameworld is a fundamentally hopeful endeavour in which we seek either to destroy the dystopia or to find meaning within it. The player does not simply *exist* in the dystopia, usually. The postapocalyptic world of *Fallout* is no doubt dystopian, but through our choices within that world we may either improve it for everyone or selfishly thrive at everyone else’s expense. The result may still be a dystopia (the endings of the *Fallout* games are hardly optimistic), but there is the agency there to make something of it, and those

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<sup>13</sup> A distinction should be made, however, between dystopia and anti-utopia. Sometimes anti-utopia is theorised in one of the ways I have characterised dystopia here: a direct critique or problematisation of an existing vision of utopian (e.g., Jameson, 2005/2007, pp. 198–199). I follow Farca (2019, p. 106) in using Tom Moylan’s (2000/2018) characterisation of anti-utopia as the assertion of the status quo, i.e., a rejection of the premise that a *better* future is even possible.

choices are often reflected (the *Fallout* endings will often include segments highlighting some of the major impacts the player had on the world).

Of the videogame utopia, Farca describes the experience as fundamentally *regenerative*: “utopian enclaves (spaces of imaginative and ergodic resistance) are ingrained into the game-world as potentialities. Players may choose to actualize these and become involved in a form of play that is fundamentally *regenerative*” (2019, p. 140; see also Farca et al., 2020 for an in-depth game example of this regenerative utopian play). In other words, the dystopia is realised, and the emancipatory potential of play is in escaping it or finding some way to improve it or make it tolerable; the utopia is unrealised, and the emancipatory potential of play is in actualising the potential future of utopia. Farca’s theory does, however, rely on what he calls the *emancipated player*, “an empirical being who is willing to engage with the implied player on a complex level, to indulge in potentialities and imaginings that are evoked, while not blindly accepting any truths” (2018, p. 17). That different kinds of players will engage with gameworlds and therefore mythologies differently is an important point.

Utopia and dystopia are not the only possible mythic futures, but they are fruitful arenas for exploring how the future is constructed and how that construction is presented to players (in this case). I would also stress the constant dual temporality implied here. Mythic pasts and futures are, I have argued, always constructed in relation to the present. Within the world of the text, however, that ‘future’ or ‘past’ is present, and our ‘present’ does not necessarily exist. Mythic othertimes in games therefore necessitate a frequent oscillation in and out of the gameworld, as with Farca’s emancipated player who is constantly comparing the dystopia or utopia to their empirical reality. Mythic futures and pasts can also be constructed with respect to the in-universe present, in which case we could consider these same processes on the level of emulation: what are in-universe groups doing with these mythic othertimes? This discussion primes us for a more in-depth discussion on the importance of games as simulations and the distinction between fictionality, virtuality and reality.

## Virtuality and simulation

Aarseth’s (2007) consideration of doors and virtual space raises further questions about virtuality in general and its connection to games. For Aarseth, the virtual represents a category somewhere between the real and the fictional. We know a gameworld is not *real* in the sense that we cannot go there ourselves, but only through representational layers that communicate the processed outputs of our inputs as mediated by a controller of some kind. But it is also not fictional in the sense that it can be “accepted upon in ways that fictional content is *not* acted upon” (Aarseth, 2007, p. 36). Juul (2021) develops ideas of the virtuality of game objects based on nine rules. These include considering, for instance, whether an object can be acted upon, whether it can be perceived from different angles, whether it is consistent with the same type of object in the real world, and so on. This also means that a game object can be *real*, for Juul. A calculator is an example. If there is a calculator in a game which really can calculate sums, then it is a real calculator, assuming that what we wanted from the calculator was for it to calculate and not, for instance, as a square-shaped brick to throw.

Both real and fictional objects can be a part of a gameworld, then. But virtuality and simulation are also important concepts with significant consequences for myth. When mythology is instantiated as a part of the virtuality of the gameworld, then we are no longer talking about a proposition, a claim, a representation, an allegory or a metaphor, but something that is *true* within the gameworld. Paradoxically, if the myth is made true, then surely it is not myth, but truth. How to make sense of this?

In *SimCity* (Maxis Emeryville, 2013), the player is tasked with building and managing a city. Many of the usual hurdles to city planning and governance are dispensed with: there are no elected officials, lobbyists, NIMBYs, stakeholders or campaigners to worry about. But there is money, and one's ings and outgoings must be balanced. The player may set taxes to raise money, with the possibility of choosing individual rates for 'Low', 'Medium' and 'High' wealth households (LW, MW and HW respectively). The game's tax system follows a set of clear rules (Ramsey, 2013):

- Taxes affect Happiness (a useful stat that drives a number of other factors).
- Each wealth level responds differently to different tax rates:
  - Happiness goes up if taxes are: LW  $\leq 7\%$ , MW  $\leq 6\%$ , HW  $\leq 5\%$ .
  - Happiness goes down if taxes are: LW  $\geq 13\%$ , MW  $\geq 12\%$ , HW  $\geq 11\%$ .
  - Happiness does not change if taxes are: LW 8–12%, MW 7–11%, HW 6–10%.
  - Above 20% tax, that wealth level will not move in.

With these rules established, it is a matter of *truth* within the gameworld that the optimal tax rates are LW 12%, MW 11% and HW 10% (Ramsey, 2013). (Optimal in terms of generating the most revenue without harming Happiness; one can set taxes lower if one wants to generate more Happiness at the expense of revenue.)

Does this concept sound familiar? In 1974, US Republican economist Arthur Laffer met with Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld and reportedly sketched on a napkin what would become a central idea in broader conservative economic thinking: the Laffer curve.<sup>14</sup> In short, the Laffer curve contends that (a) no tax revenue is generated at either 0% or 100% tax rates, and that (b) between those figures, there is an optimal rate that maximises tax revenue. Conservatives typically use this curve to argue that lowering tax rates—particularly on the wealthy—actually increases the overall tax take. Arguments include the idea that high tax rates cause wealthy individuals and businesses to simply move or invest elsewhere, or incite them to avoid or evade tax at a higher rate, or act as an anchor on growth, resulting in less overall taxable revenue over a period. *SimCity* clearly employs this Laffer curve thinking, instantiating it via Happiness as a curve with an optimal rate. Indeed, the game employs a particularly right-wing vision of it, whereby a *regressive* tax rate—one that is *higher* for poorer people—is optimal. *SimCity*'s tax system therefore bakes in a number of assumptions:

1. The Laffer curve is true and its optimal tax rate is known.

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<sup>14</sup> Laffer (2004) notes that the concept was not his originally and that the idea had long been in circulation, citing 14<sup>th</sup> century Muslim philosopher Ibn Khaldun and early 20<sup>th</sup> century English economist John Maynard Keynes. Nonetheless, it is his name that has stuck.

2. Poorer people will put up with higher tax rates than richer people before becoming unhappy.
3. No one will put up with a  $\geq 20\%$  tax rate.

If we read a novel about this city, we would probably assume the author to be some Randian hack. To make such a reality in a fictional world is to make a claim, because the author did not otherwise have to tell us about the tax rate. There are plenty of books centring on cities that do not go into detail on their systems of taxation. The virtuality of the game, the fact that *SimCity* is, as the name suggests, a simulation of a city, means that such systems do not appear to us as stark *claims*, rather quiet realities. It was not until I started writing this dissertation that I had ever thought about what kind of claims *SimCity* was making with its taxation systems, despite being an avid player of such games.

This is not to say that the politics of the *SimCity* series (1989–2014) have flown completely under the radar. Certainly they haven't amongst academics since at least the mid-to-late 1990s (Friedman, 1999; Kolson, 1996; Manocchia, 1999). But it is telling that even now when analyses in this vein are published in popular discourse, the ideological structures are described as “hidden” or “secret”. See, for example, *Polygon*'s ‘The Ideology Hiding in *SimCity*'s Black Box’ (Ashley, 2021). The implication here is essentially mythological: *SimCity* purports not to make any explicit political claim, but instead naturalises its political claims such that they are not questioned. To uncover those claims requires a peeling back of the myth. Hanna Wirman (2011) makes a similar point as regards the feeling of freedom and the latent ideology in *The Sims 2* (Maxis Redwood Shores, 2004), arguing that “when the setting is laid out well enough, it does not even occur to the player to want something that does not fit together with the ideology. The feeling of freedom is paradoxically produced by control” (2011, p. 113).

By taking mythologies and instantiating them in a gameworld's simulation or virtuality—through rules, systems, mechanics, space, time and so on—we are in some way forced to acknowledge the mythology as true. This is not a ‘full’ truth, because we are still aware that the game is not the real world. But when we are in the gameworld, we must act *as if* it is true, because it is *virtually* true. This inhabiting of a particular set of virtual truths helps the decontextualisation of myth. With *SimCity*'s taxation system instantiated in the code with the same level of truth as the laws of physics, it does not need to be argued for or justified, it simply *is*. As game designer Paolo Pedercini (Molleindustria) notes, this may have important implications because the series “has been used and is being used as an education tool” and is “shaping the way a lot of people understand or misunderstand city planning” (2017). This educational goal is corroborated by the now-defunct *SimCityEDU* (2013), a version of the game developed in partnership with the now-defunct Glasslab Games. The danger of simulation in this sense (without straying into moral panic) is that the premises of the simulation, though salient to the discussion, are often taken for granted. Mythology can easily sneak into the truth value conferred by simulation.

While simulation *games* (as opposed to computer simulations, cf. Bogost, 2006, p. 98; Frasca, 2003, pp. 223–224) do not purport to be true necessarily, any simulation *does* purport to be “a representation of a source system via a less complex system” (Bogost, 2006, p. 98).

Ida Katherine Hammeleff Jørgensen (2020, pp. 114–152) describes simulations in terms of ‘representation-as’, meaning that the simulation does not ‘pretend’ to be the real thing, but that interpretation of the simulation is implied to also have some kind of relation to the thing being simulated. Josef Köstlbauer argues that “simulation games inhabit the spaces in between play and reality” (2013, p. 172). In this way, simulation helps the decontextualizing of myth.

This relates to Barthes’ (1968/1989) *reality effect*, the notion that the incidental, inconsequential aspects of realist narrative become “the very signifier of realism” (1968/1989, p. 148) itself. This has been related to games, for example by Brian Rejack (2007) in an analysis of the reality effect in historical games. Nikolaus König and Rusch (2007) use Barthes’ work on narrative functions to discuss the challenges and affordances of “an imbalance in reality-status between rules and fiction”, wherein “due to their higher-reality status, the rules in the sense of game-play are simply more involving than the fictional components with their lower reality-status” (2007, para. 79). The simulational rules of the game are “more *real* (immediate, salient) than the fictional context, which in most games is conveyed in a non-enactive way” (2007, para. 24).

Rusch (2017, p. 35) notes that we can read simulations by the choices made in the abstraction of the source system: which elements are included and which are not (taxes in *SimCity*, but not lobbying groups, for instance), which are more or less important to the gameplay goals, in what level of detail these elements are modelled. These choices reveal something of how the designer perceives the source system. For my purposes here, these choices can be informed or constituted by the designer’s mythic environment. This is not to say that excavating the designer’s intent is the goal of these analyses, but rather that I understand simulation games and simulation in games as perhaps *particularly* mythological, in that the simulation makes an implicit claim to truth (or at least fidelity to truth), but is really “not more objective than any other medium” (Rusch, 2017, p. 35). This kind of masking is important to the function of myth, whether that is seen insidiously or not.

## Play, performance and agency

Any robust approach to games must account for play. Semiotics—particularly in its origins—has primarily been concerned with the constative sign. A word, a novel, a film, an advertisement, a photo—all media which are in some sense fixed. When I pick up a novel, I (broadly speaking) know that the words will be arranged in the same order each time I read it. Likewise a film and its sequence of shots. There are, of course, exceptions to greater or lesser degrees, such as the *Choose Your Own Adventure* books (1979–1998) or interactive movies like *Kinoautomat* (Činčera et al., 1967) and *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (Slade, 2018). Even aside from being the exception rather than the rule, however, these examples have still been theorized as fundamentally different to games, owing to their typically far more limited degree of agency or capacity to act, and the fact that the experience they engender is typically nonetheless experientially linear, even if a different ‘line’ could have been taken (King & Krzywinska, 2002; Veale, 2012).

Part of this distinction can be understood through philosopher of language J. L. Austin's (1962) grammatical distinction between *performative* and *constative* utterances. A constative utterance is one which describes or makes a statement about something, even if falsely. A performative utterance is one which *does* something in its utterance. Saying 'I do' as part of a wedding ceremony and making a bet are examples Austin gives of performative utterances (1962, pp. 5–6): they do not *describe* an act, they are *in themselves* the act. Games researcher Ragnhild Tronstad (2001) employs Austin's distinction in understanding quests in multi-user dungeons (MUDs), contrasting stories with quests:

Stories in general belong to the order of meaning, together with the constatives, and not to the order of the act. Quests, on the other hand, are basically performative: they belong first and foremost to the order of the act. As soon as they're solved, though, they turn into constatives. The reason quests can easily be confused with "stories" is that we are normally analysing the quest in retrospective, after we've already solved it. To ignore the performative aspect of quests this way is fundamentally to misjudge questing as a practice. (2001, p. 3)

Tronstad's paper comes at the beginning of game studies scholars theorising quests. Aarseth (2004, 2005) builds on Tronstad to argue for quests as being a primarily spatial rather than narrative structure. This is because, for Aarseth, games *can* contain or produce stories, but not the other way around. Games are therefore primarily about the traversal of space as guided and constrained by quests, which may (in agreement with Tronstad) be arranged retrospectively into stories (2005, p. 503). This is partly because of how these quests are structured together. Aarseth (2005, p. 498) lays out three basic elements of quests (time, place and objective), which can be freely combined (e.g., time and place could be 'get there before...'). Over the course of a game, these can be strung together in three basic ways (2005, p. 499): a unicursal corridor where each quest follows the previous in sequence; a semi-open hub where a specific location is used from which one can freely choose their next quest that takes them out into the world; and an open landscape, a more rhizomatic structure where players simply traverse and can more or less complete quests in any order. These structures can of course also be combined, for example a semi-open hub rather than leading to individual quests may give the player of which 'unicursal corridor' to go down next. As Aarseth concedes (2005, p. 503), there are no doubt games whose quest structure is nearly identical to a narrative structure—particularly unicursal corridor games. The point is hierarchical, as previously mentioned: games may contain or produce stories, but the commonality between games of all kinds is their simulation. What the simulation entails is that the player may nonprescriptively (but often guidedly) traverse the gamespace, and they may then construct and tell stories of their traversal afterwards. I go along with Tronstad and Aarseth here. Games contain many elements that we might call constative, but the way in which we engage with the game is performative. *Play* is performative in this sense. This is part of the reason why folkloric approaches such as mythic discourse analysis are appealing, because they account for constative aspects of a society—stories, artworks, histories and so on—but

also for what kinds of *performance* hold meaning—rituals, customs, manners and so on. These can be taken together.

Darshana Jayemanne (2017) raises an issue with the adaptation of Austin's utterances to games, however. Austin "assumes that each performance is clear and distinct, a *unit*" (2017, p. 3). For Austin talking about language, these are 'speech acts'. This is relatively easy to do for language: we can isolate a word, a sentence, a phrase. Jayemanne notes that this is not so straightforward in games. We might initially assume that pressing a button constitutes the performative unit of a game, he says (2017, p. 3), but closer examination of jumping shows instead that "in each game, the jumping performance is integrally related to the context provided by specific level and character designs, all of which give meaning and structure to the performance" (2017, p. 4). The "extreme heterogeneity" of videogames means for Jayemanne that "performance in games is not a concatenation of basic units, but a complex multidimensional weave" (2017, p. 5). Jayemanne presents three types of videogames performances based on "the way that they emerge from the performative multiplicity of a given game" (2017, p. 240): ludic acts, illudic acts and perludic acts. *Ludic acts* are associated with the analog and the acts that occur prior to play. They involve the social situation, the configuration of hardware, software and peripherals and more. "*Ludic acts* configure the overall multiplicity from which particular performances arise" (2017, p. 241). *Illudic* and *perludic acts* are both 'within' the game. While "*illudic acts* are those *in* which something playful is done", "*perludic acts* are those *by* which something playful is done" (2017, pp. 241, 242). Illudic acts "involve the introduction or enactment of primary digital differences into the game's performative multiplicity", such as "the microgesture of moving a mouse in order to aim a weapon's targeting reticule on the game screen" (2017, p. 241). Perludic acts "involve secondary digital distinctions into the system by acting on primary differences and generally work through hypermediate frames and generic series" (2017, p. 242).

Aiming and discharging a weapon (*in* pulling the trigger I fired the gun) in a FPS is an illudic act, but the perludic act of shooting an enemy is only achieved if the player acquires the target and aims the weapon correctly ('*by* firing the weapon I destroyed the enemy'), thus digitalizing the performance in a certain way. (2017, p. 243)

Jayemanne's problematising and operationalisation of performance in games is useful for granularity and to help distinguish between performative and constative elements in games.

With performance now complicated, *play* itself deserves to suffer the same treatment. Despite having just described play as performative, play could also be construed as interpretive, as the means by which we *interpret* a game. As I started this section by saying, semiotics has been primarily concerned with the constative sign. Games therefore present something of a challenge. Is it possible to semiotically analyse something as a text whose constituent signs can be rearranged, reconfigured or even added or removed by its 'reader'? This question has a tradition of answers, from landmark works like George P. Landow's *Hypertext* (1992) to Aarseth's *Cybertext* (1997) and beyond. In these theories, the reader—or player—configures or reconfigures a string of signs. Aarseth, for example, distinguishes between *scriptons* and *textons*: "strings as they appear to readers and strings as they exist in the text",

respectively (1997, p. 62). Textons might be thought of as possibility space, with scriptons being the path through that space realised by the player. In a Landow or Aarseth model of nonlinear, configurative semiosis, the implication is that one *configures* the sign system, which can then be analysed as a constative system in a more traditional reader–text dynamic.

Play in this interpretive mode is closely associated with *procedural rhetorics*. Broadly speaking, procedural rhetorics is the notion that games can make arguments (rhetoric) through their rules, mechanics and systems (procedures). Crucially, in this theory, games can do so *without* a semiotic system that contextualises those procedures. This is a position of some debate in game studies, brought to prominence by Bogost in *Unit Operations* (2006) and *Persuasive Games* (2007). But the starting point for procedural rhetorics comes from Janet H. Murray's influential *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997/2017). For Murray, "the computer is a procedural medium" (1997/2017, p. 223), and, as she titles a subsection, "*Digital Environments are Procedural*" (1997/2017, p. 88). Using the example of a 1966 MIT experiment involving a computer program called ELIZA that tries to reply in a 'human' way to what the user types to it, Murray argues that "the lesson of ELIZA is that the computer can be a compelling medium for storytelling if we can write rules for it that are recognizable as an interpretation of the world" (1997/2017, p. 90). What Murray lays the foundation for here is a perspective that the rules and procedures of a system can in themselves produce or contain meaning that can be interpreted. When Bogost coins the term *procedural rhetorics*, he defines it as such:

*Procedurality* refers to a way of creating, explaining, or understanding processes. And processes define the way things work: the methods, techniques, and logics that drive the operation of systems, from mechanical systems like engines to organizational systems like high schools to conceptual systems like religious faith. *Rhetoric* refers to effective and persuasive expression. Procedural rhetoric, then, is a practice of using processes persuasively. More specifically, procedural rhetoric is the practice of persuading through processes in general and computational processes in particular. Just as verbal rhetoric is useful for both the orator and the audience, and just as written rhetoric is useful for both the writer and the reader, so procedural rhetoric is useful for both the programmer and the user, the game designer and the player. Procedural rhetoric is a technique for making arguments with computational systems and for unpacking computational arguments others have created. (2007, pp. 2–3)

Essentially, with forms that are primarily linguistic (such as prose), meaning is expressed by the persuasive use of language: rhetoric. With forms that are, in Bogost's view (building from his work in *Unit Operations*), fundamentally procedural rather than linguistic, meaning is correspondingly expressed by the persuasive use of procedures. "Procedural rhetoric is a general name for the practice of authoring arguments through processes" (2007, pp. 28–29). His reasoning for requiring a new paradigm of interpretation is a reasonable one:

Just as visual rhetoricians argue that verbal and written rhetorics inadequately account for the unique properties of visual expression, so I argue that

verbal, written, and visual rhetorics inadequately account for the unique properties of procedural expression. (2007, p. 29)

If software produces meaning in a different way from language, then it requires a different mode of interpretation. Play in this light can be seen as a way of reading procedures. We play with a system, a simulation, a game, etc., and in doing so get a sense for its procedures, how they make us feel, what they make us do. We figure out how a game handles movement by running around in circles and trying out the jump button.

However, the premise that digital games produce meaning fundamentally in their simulational aspects has not gone without challenge. Sicart (2011) critiques procedural rhetorics for this focus which reduces play to the interpretation of a system:

The assumption behind mainstream proceduralism is that the meaning of games is contained exclusively in the formal system of the game. What players do is to reconfigure the meanings embedded in the rules defined by the designers. Playing, then, becomes accepting *and learning from* the system-based message embedded in the game. (2011)

Sicart rejects the notion that the game has meaning “prior to the act of playing the game” (2011). He argues that this “turns the act of playing a game into a labor-like action, into work towards an externally decided, predetermined, and rational outcome designed by others than the players”, because play becomes an instrumental reaction to a rational system (2011). For Sicart, a proceduralist reading of games positions play exclusively within the rational realm of instrumentalisation and scientism under the logic of Enlightenment. This reading misses fundamental aspects of play, Sicart argues, because “play is not a scientific process, but it is within the realm of myth and the rite as much as within the realm of rationality” (2011). Play is not fully rational, and therefore cannot simply be a read as a process by which players interpret the inherent meaning of a game’s rules and systems.

Sicart proposes an alternative understanding of play:

Games structure play, facilitate it by means of rules. This is not to say that rules determine play: they focus it, they frame it, but they are still subject to the very act of play. Play, again, is an act of appropriation of the game by players. (2011)

Rather than the meaning being located exclusively within the ‘game object’ and beamed unidirectionally to the player, the meaning of a game is an act of negotiation and appropriation through play. “The meaning of a game, its essence, is not determined by the rules, but by the way players engage with those rules, by the way players *play*. The *meaning* of games, then, is played, not procedurally generated” (Sicart, 2011). Crucially this view allows space in our interpretations for the player to “affect the game with their virtues, to explore their relation with what the game proposes by means of their values and political ideas” (2011). As Sicart has more recently put it, “play is a way of *relating to rules*” (2021, p. 5, emphasis added). This means that the meaning of the game is not fixed and interpreted through the act of play. Rather, the game sets up rules and systems which afford, guide and restrict play, and it is through play that the meaning is generated.

Sicart's notion that meaning is generated entirely through play (even if afforded and guided by the game artefact) has also been challenged. Nguyen (2020) accepts Sicart's focus on play, but pulls back a little, arguing that "games share with traditional artworks a *prescriptive frame*" (2020, p. 121). He argues that there is an important distinction between free play and games. While the former "offers creativity, raw freedom, and an unrestricted playground for the imagination", when we engage with the latter "we submit ourselves to publicized prescriptions, in order to pass stabilized experiences between people ... games are a language, of sorts, for communicating modes of agency" (2020, p. 122). In this way, with a library of games we have access to a "library of agencies" (2020, p. 78), agencies which "we might never have found on our own" (2020, p. 83). For Nguyen, this is the value of games distinct from free play: the communication and sharing of agencies. Sharing agencies in this way requires an at least somewhat stable experience, some shared foundation that can be found in the rules and systems that encode the mode of agency. There is, as Nguyen provocatively titles an article, a "right way to play a game" (2019a).

However, Nguyen concedes the scope for difference within that crystallised agential encoding. He introduces the concept of *striving play*, by which we "take on ends for the sake of the means they force us through" (2020, p. 27). The argument is that when one plays a game, one cares deeply about the game-internal goal prescribed by the rules. This goal does not confer any real or tangible benefit outside of the game. It is essentially useless to us. "I care about collecting yellow tokens only during this board game; afterward, I don't care at all about those yellow tokens" (2020, p. 28). By caring about those disposable goals for the duration of the game, we submit ourselves to the pleasure of the modes of agency required for the pursuit of those goals. Nguyen argues that the dipping in and out of agencies afforded by striving play helps us manage those agencies and assert ourselves onto them:

Aesthetic striving play ... develops the capacity to submerge ourselves in temporary agencies. But it also helps to develop the capacity to manage and control that submersion. It helps us assert our own values and interests against the pull of the temporary agencies, with their compartmentalized and clear experiences of value. Aesthetic striving play builds both the agential fluidity, and the capacity to manage that fluidity. (2020, p. 221)

According to Nguyen, then, playing a game as it is prescribed "retrieves the particular sorts of experiences that the artist intended to embed in the material artifact", but "we also have reason to experience, to re-mix and re-shuffle, to try out various artifacts under various different prescriptive regimes" (2019a).

With this, let's iterate on the cycle I described earlier. There are two additions. One is an extra step, "player plays the game, relates to mythology", in response to this discussion on play, performance and agency. The other is an arrow showing that this circle can be skipped—i.e., the game can be interpreted without playing it.

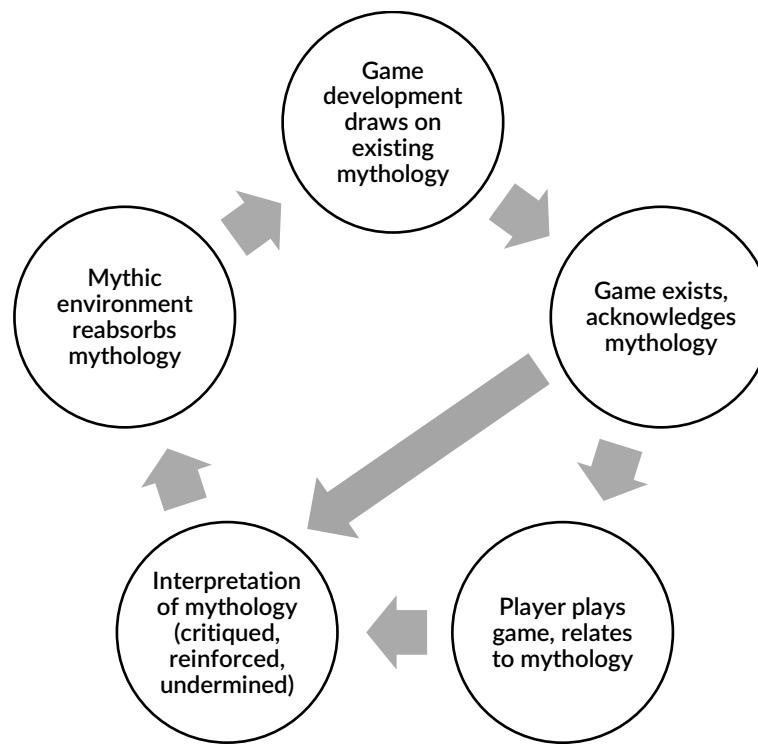


Figure 5. A revised graphical representation of how mythology cycles within a given mythic environment.

This is of course still very abstracted and simplified. The two additions are important to touch on here. The first is the addition of play, both in itself as a way of relating to a given mythology in the game, and as part of the interpretive process. The second is the inclusion of an arrow which bypasses play entirely. This is because to interpret a game, play is not *required*. As described in the previous section on simulations, we can produce interpretations about the mythologies in a simulation game by looking at what it does and does not simulate and how it does so. I confess: I have not played *SimCity* (2013). Yet I felt able to produce an interpretation of it. (I have played other *SimCity* games as well as other citybuilder games, in fairness.) If I were to analyse the game further—i.e., if it were one of my primary game examples—then I would of course play it. But this would primarily be to test my interpretation and to produce other ones. One *can* produce an interpretation without playing the game, provided one knows what to look for. These can be bad interpretations, and are perhaps more likely to be: consider the many people who have very strong opinions on the *Grand Theft Auto* series (1997–2022) without having ever played one.

The point here is that *both* the instantiation of the mythology in the game artefact *and* how players play with it affect the mythology. Another example that will appear later is with *Skyrim*. Kristian A. Bjørkelo (2020) explores why white nationalist groups seem to have ‘adopted’ *Skyrim* as embodying their politics. This seems strange. White nationalists—particularly of the kind to frequent the forum Stormfront, which is Bjørkelo’s focus—are (fortunately) a small minority, yet *Skyrim* has enjoyed enormous mainstream success since its release in 2011. How can both be true if *Skyrim* seems to support white nationalist thinking? The answer for Bjørkelo lies in Stuart Hall’s (1973/2018) encoding/decoding model, applied to games. Because *Skyrim* is a very open game with a great degree of freedom for the player

to, for example, join completely opposing causes, there is room for the player to bring their own frameworks to bear. Bjørkelo concludes:

The White Nationalist interpretation of *Skyrim* is as valid as any other decoding of the game. The affordances created by the intersection of the game and of their political position, allows the game to be experienced as a White Nationalist power fantasy, potentially strengthening their narrative and position. But as this interpretation is dependent on an existing White Nationalist framework of thought. (2020)

I explore this example in more detail later and situate it within broader readings of *Skyrim*, but for the point at hand this is a clear example of this gulf between the game rules and systems as instantiated, and those rules and systems as *played*, whereby how the player chooses to play can have potentially enormous consequences on the meaning produced.

When we then consider the ‘end’ of the cycle—the mythology’s reabsorption into the mythic environment—we find that *both* of those aspects can affect it. Knowing the white nationalist interpretation of *Skyrim* affects me and changes how I view the game, while also knowing that it is only one such interpretation and that, as Bjørkelo notes, it is still “dependent on an existing White Nationalist framework of thought” (2020). Conversely, if I did not know about the game at all but had only heard of it as the darling game of Stormfront, I may have a (very skewed) idea of the mythologies the game employs and what it does with them. I might be rather put off playing it!

## 3.2 Mytholudics

Based on this, allow me to introduce a final version of the cycle that encapsulates *mythologies*, or the interpretation of games as/through mythology.

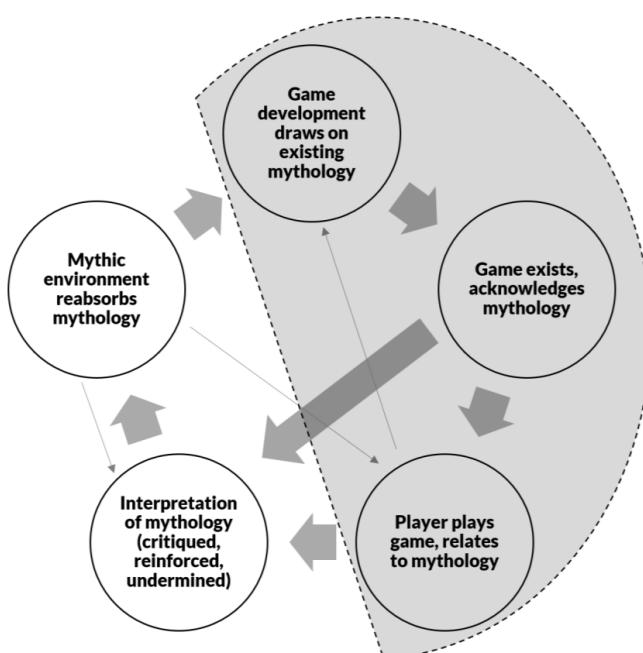


Figure 6. The final version of the mytholudic cycle.

This version primary adds some extra details to the previous diagram, rather than core information. The thinner arrows indicate some other important functions that are occurring through this process, but which I do not focus on so directly. Game development always involves playing the game, for example. Indeed, the cycle could in a smaller sense run internally during development, where the game ‘existing’ refers to a prototype. The mythic environment of the player or interpreter may impact upon how they play or interpret the game. The shaded area marks the game in three positions: as development, as artefact, and as played. At these three stages there is necessarily some direct engagement with the game itself. The other two aspects exist ‘outside’ of the game in this respect. One can read or hear interpretations of a game without engaging with the game itself. And the game only feeds into the mythic environment via interpretation first.

Mytholudics sees mythology as constantly in flux, negotiated through interpretation and related to through play. It sees mythology as a mode of expression rather than a kind of object or a genre of story, a mode of expression which produces a model for understanding the world and for asserting that model as true and natural. The model is not a proposition that arises out of contemporary circumstances and which is up for debate, rather it is pre-contextualised and made to seem like it has always been in place: things have always been this way. Because of this, I am interested in this dissertation not in what is *unusual* or particular about many games so much as I am in what appears to be utterly ordinary. Mytholudics is the analysis of the obvious. Step one: what is the truth of the gameworld? Step two: why *that* truth and not another? This relies on a kind of doublethink that the gameworld is both true and untrue, for if its truth were true truth, it would not be myth but plain truth. This is navigated through virtuality. Gameworlds are neither real nor fictional, they are virtual. They are playgrounds for goals we temporarily seek and agencies we try on. While in the gameworld, the gameworld is real and its truth is truth. But we also know that that truth applies only within that virtuality, and so appears as fiction when we are out of the game, fiction which says something about our real world. Likewise with time, gameworlds instantiate pasts, presents and futures both real and speculative within the gameworld, even if they do not correspond to real-world moments. The past within the gameworld must be taken as real within that gameworld—or at least a real *perception* of time—and its implications worked through. The otherworlds that are created are both other in relation to us—the gameworld is in itself an otherworld—but may also be constituted as other in relation to the established norms and truth of the gameworld. Mytholudics attempts to straddle these two reference points: the real-world mythic environment and context of the player and/or interpreter, and the emulated mythic environment of the gameworld.



# 4 METHODS

How does a mytholudic analysis proceed? The procedure of the analysis is essentially hermeneutic, which I outline following Michał Kłosiński's recent article, 'How to Interpret Digital Games?' (2022) for clarity. The framework for the analysis is based on my understanding of myth, following particularly Barthes (1972/2009) and Frog (2021a). These three approaches constitute interweaving aspects of my analysis. In broad strokes: Barthesian mythology provides the big picture, the overarching goal of analysing the movement of mythologies from culture, through games and back into culture; Frog's mythic discourse analysis provides a more robust and granular framework for discussing what *constitutes* mythology, what its constituent elements are, and how those can then be compared with others and over time; and hermeneutics describes the manner by which I read and interpret a game.

## 4.1 Mythic Discourse Analysis

Mythic discourse analysis is a method proposed by Finnish folklorist Frog (2015, 2021a) for analysing the way in which particular mythologies are used, engaged with and made sense of by a particular group, as well as for comparison between groups. *Mythic discourse* is described by Frog as "mythology as it is used, transmitted, and manipulated in a society, whether referring to such discourse in society generally or to a specific instantiation of discourse" (2021a, p. 161). *Mythology* in Frog's understanding is "constituted of signs that are emotionally invested by people within a society as models for knowing the world" (2021a, p. 161). The use of the term *signs* here refers to the semiotic tradition, including Barthes (1972/2009). Frog avoids the term *myth*, preferring instead *mythology* "in terms of quality of signs rather than in terms of signs' formal properties" (2021a, p. 168), relating to my focus on mythologisation as a process rather than a static, stable noun. Although Frog's focus here is Norse and Finno-Karelian folklore and mythology, the method is intended for much broader applications and can be tailored to specific areas of research, whether delimited "geographically, temporally, through linguistic-cultural heritage, religion, or transcultural network" (2021a, p. 168). It therefore lends itself as a method for my purposes here: examining the mythic discourse of games in general, and of particular games specifically.

The basis of this approach is in *integers* and *equations*. An *integer* is essentially the most minimal element that can be "recognized and interpreted as meaningful" (2021a, p. 169). As in Barthes' two-part structure of signs, an integer can be something with a rich and complex signification process, but in mythologisation is collapsed into a single sign. Thus, THOR can be a mythic integer. In Frog's method, SMALL CAPITALS are used to help distinguish formal equations from the rest of the text, a convention I adhere to also. Integers can be comprised of multiple syntagms where more than one word is required to form an integer, or where adjectives and verbs are required. For example, SUPERNATURAL.AGENT or FROM:ODIN (2021a, p. 170). In the former case, neither "supernatural" nor "agent" are sufficient to constitute a meaningful unit of mythic discourse on their own, but together form an element that is

## 4 Methods

widely recognisable in a variety of contexts. Crucially, as discourse, these integers can change over time, and the interpretation or significance of them can also change—a process I understand partly through the metaphors of ossification and fossilisation.

The *equations* that Frog mentions are the combination of integers used in a particular “analysis of ways they may combine and interact” (2021a, p. 170). These equations can thus describe a variety of phenomena. For example, superstitions and taboos:

PERSON MOCKS THUNDER  
→ THUNDER STRIKES MOCKER  
(2021a, p. 185)

The right arrow here indicates that that element follows from the preceding one, as sequence, consequence or causality. As will be exemplified, equations can range from basic combinations of two integers, to branching consequential sequences, to narrative patterns and plots. Equations may also make use of combinations of letters and numbers so that they can be more easily referred back to. For example, a motif may be labelled ‘A1’, its related first consequence ‘A2’, and then the second motif ‘B1’. This is not necessary to do every time but can be a helpful aid. Frog gives an example:

A. MAN ENCOUNTERS NATURE.SPIRIT  
B1. (→ NATURE.SPIRIT MAKES REQUEST)  
B2. (→ NATURE.SPIRIT COMPLAINS OF:DIFFICULTY)  
C. → MAN DOES~GIVES SOMETHING WHICH:PLEASES NATURE.SPIRIT  
D. → NATURE.SPIRIT REWARDS MAN WITH:GAME~CATCH  
(2021a, p. 183)

Analysing mythology in this way is the first step towards decoupling myth from story and operationalising it for analysis. Operating through a narrative framework, we are liable to see stories where there are none. We may be dealing with fragmentary works (particularly in the studies of old or ancient material), and the assumption that myth is a kind of story may cause us either to construe singular images or events as stories, stretching the definition beyond usefulness, or to presume that there *is* some broader story that we have not yet discovered (Frog, 2018, pp. 10–11; Frog & Ahola, 2021, pp. 42–43). That presumption may well be true, but it is not a presumption based on good evidence. “Fragmented mythology of cosmogony is not as unusual as we might imagine; it simply gets concealed beneath the inclination to reconstruct mythologies as coherent”, Frog argues (2018, p. 11). This inclination can be seen in the likely erroneous creation of a single, stable, coherent Norse pantheon, for example (see Gunnell, 2015). In this case, by beginning from the point of an Old Norse religion (singular), we flatten the wide array of beliefs over geographic space, and the changing of those beliefs over time. Likewise, coming to myth from the framework of story flattens the varied and changing cultural meaning-making practices and models for understanding the world into “linear plot, with an implicit presumption that it is false knowledge ... collapsing the potentially complex networks of relations” (Frog, 2021a, p. 43). In outlining myth as one of his seven simple forms, André Jolles argues that the “*event* ... defines the *verbal*

*gesture of myth*" (1929/2017, p. 90), highlighting this more fragmentary nature in opposition to coherent, linear story.

Frog's method may also resemble morphologies like Propp's (1958/1968) or structuralist systems that propose basic units like Lévi-Strauss' (1955) *mythemes* or Alan Dundes' (1962) *motifemes* and *allomotifs*. However, Frog argues that these "remained vague and inclusive categories insofar as they were not defined as formal units interacting with formal units of other types" (2021a, p. 166). These approaches focus on the relations between elements, but not on the elements themselves as socially constituted signs that change in meaning and salience over time and across cultures (2021a, p. 166). Frog argues that "approaching mythology through mythic discourse brings into focus diversity, variation, and interactions of different perspectives" and can take into account a "social position and its perspective characterized by a respective ideology for engaging with mythic signs, an ideology integrated in an associated worldview" (2021a, p. 169).

From this basis, Frog explains the different types of minimal integers as well as more complex ones.

### Image

Comparable to the grammatical category of noun (2021a, p. 172). Like nouns, images can be proper nouns, indicating something or someone specific, or they can be more abstract, general or categorical. A proper noun like THOR is termed a *centralized sign* or *integer*, as opposed to a "*decentralized sign* or *integer* like TROLL or GIANT" (2021a, p. 172).

### Motif

"Whereas an image is static, a *motif* is dynamic; it can be considered a type of equation that incorporates a verb and involves change or situates two or more images in a relation" (2021a, p. 175). Like images, these can be centralised, when looking at specific instances, or decentralised when abstracted.

THOR	SLAYS	GEIRRØÐR	Centralized
THOR	SLAYS	HRUNGNIR	Centralized
THOR	SLAYS	MÍDGARDSORMR	Centralized
THOR	SLAYS	GIANT~MONSTER	Decentralized

(2021a, p. 175)

Even more abstractly, THOR SLAYS GIANT~MONSTER can be considered the narrower Scandinavian model of the motif HERO SLAYS DEVIL~MONSTER (2021a, p. 176). Note that a tilde (~) between two integers means roughly 'or' in the inclusive sense. So, THOR SLAYS GIANT~MONSTER could be written out more verbosely as something like, 'Thor slays some kind of giant or monster'. Intuitively, this level of abstraction seems unhelpful and arbitrary, and indeed it is not always appropriate. However, it can be useful in establishing basic relations within a mythology: who is the hero doing the slaying, and who or what is the devil who must be slain? Additionally, because each part of a motif is already an insular unit of cultural knowledge, configurations and reconfigurations of them into different motifs can quickly have large ripple effects for the system of mythologies as a whole.

### Partial

“Elements and features that are constitutive of a mythic integer, through which it is recognized, and/or that are assumed for it” (2021a, p. 173). Frog gives the example of SUPERNATURAL.STRENGTH, which is a partial for both THOR and GIANT. But, at the same time, SUPERNATURAL.STRENGTH is, by itself, broad enough that it does not *automatically* evoke or relate to THOR or GIANT without further partials, such as GIANT-SLAYER for THOR (2021a, pp. 173–174). In contrast, “ONE-EYED is a partial that indexes ODIN in Scandinavia to a degree that it is emblematic of the god” (2021a, p. 174). Another example could be a metonym like DEERSTALKER, which in some contexts (particularly detective fiction or scenarios) is a partial fully emblematic of SHERLOCK, and in others is not particularly significant.

How partials come to relate to particular integers can be difficult to define. Frog draws on Jens Peter Schjødt’s term *semantic center* (2013). This is a central set of features or attributes from which perspective we should consider the orbital elements. How the centre is understood contextualises how and in what way the partials are significant:

For instance when Odin dresses up like a woman in Saxo Grammaticus’s description of the rape of Rinda, this is not because Odin is effeminate, but because he, as the god who ‘knows’, is responsible for the course of the world after the killing of Balder, and also because he knows how to change shape and disguise himself: it remains consistent with fundamentals of the semantics of Odin as a god directly connected to his associations with the numinous and with wisdom. (Schjødt, 2013, p. 13)

With an understanding of the core aspects of Odin, we understand his dressing up like a woman differently than if another entity did. Analysis is both informed by and attempts to find this centre. I will also use the term semantic centre in a broader sense to describe what a game’s meaning-making core seems to be. That is, considering how the game defines its own context for interpretation of the elements within it.

### Theme

A more complex construction formed of “regular constellations of images and motifs … formally distinguished from motifs in terms of their complexity and potential to embed, repeat, and vary motifs that may also occur independent of the theme” (2021a, p. 182). For example, Frog outlines the “*Dream Communication* theme”:

```
S.A [SUPERNATURAL.AGENT] COMMUNICATES REQUEST~WARNING IN:DREAM  
(← X DISTURBS~HARMS S.A)  
IF → DREAMER COMPLIES WITH:REQUEST~WARNING  
    THEN → DREAMER BENEFITS  
IF → DREAMER IGNORES REQUEST~WARNING  
    THEN → DREAMER SUFFERS  
(2021a, p. 182)
```

A theme can embed multiple motifs in a number of ways, such as the above example of a request/warning and branching responses, or a common sequence of motifs, or a set of

behaviours. This can be applied to games in terms of gameplay loops. A very simple example could be:

```
PLAYER.CHARACTER SLAYS BOSS
→ BOSS DROPS VALUABLE.LOOT
```

This is a relatively mundane example, but already we see a difference when compared with many legends. In legends, the great foe will not typically be in possession of the valuable treasure, rather the destruction of the monster and the removal of its threat is itself the reward, or else the reward comes from those who wanted the monster dead. The boss dropping the loot is already a manipulation or divergence from traditional motifs.

### Narrative pattern

As theme is to motif, so narrative pattern is to theme. A narrative pattern is a yet more complex constellation of multiple themes and motifs, which can repeat within the same pattern (2021a, p. 187).

### Plot

“A theme or narrative pattern that is customarily instantiated as a sequential whole from complication to resolution as a (potentially multimedial) textual integer” (2021a, p. 191). While a narrative pattern may be incomplete or fragmentary, “an indicator of plot is that it is characterized by finalization, which demarcates the utterance as a complete whole” (2021a, p. 191).

### Brackets

It is also important to note the use of different kinds of brackets that can modify any of the previous categories. Parentheses indicate that that element can be omitted. In the example used for theme, ( $\leftarrow$  X DISTURBS~HARMS S.A) occurs often enough to be included, but is not required for the overall theme. Square brackets indicate that that element is implicit. Curly brackets indicate an immanent motif, one “that *could* happen under certain conditions, such as if a taboo is violated” (2021a, p. 184). Frog (2021a, p. 185) gives an example:

```
DEVIL FLEES THUNDER
[ $\leftarrow$  {THUNDER STRIKES DEVIL}]
```

This describes a taboo regarding devils and thunder, where the motif [ $\leftarrow$  {THUNDER STRIKES DEVIL}] is both implicit and immanent. We observe that a devil flees thunder and infer from that (hence the left arrow) the *implication* that the devil flees because devils get struck by thunder, which is also *immanent* because it is a potential consequence rather than an actual occurrence.

## Why mythic discourse analysis?

Although partially answered at the beginning of this section, a reasonable question to restate at this point is why a method devised for the study of Old Norse and Finno-Karelian religion,

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folklore and mythology should be relevant for the study of digital games. On the purpose of mythic discourse analysis, Frog writes:

The approach to mythic discourse outlined here presents a set of tools for abstracting source evidence into integers of tradition and their use. ... The formal analysis of what is being manipulated provides a framework in which the patterns of use of individual mythic integers may be traced through the corpus in order to assess their package of traditional meanings, associations, evaluations, and interpretations, and also to explore the meanings and significance of their use and manipulation in particular cases. Once the operation of mythic discourse is in focus, the dynamics of meaning-making become more visible. (2021a, p. 204)

There seems to me no reason why this method cannot also apply to contemporary cultures and to forms of media such as games. (Indeed, traditional, nondigital games could also be analysed within the Old Norse context with this method, so a jump to digital games does not seem so large.) Frog briefly reflects that “I sought to reconcile theories of mythology with that I observed in both non-modern and modern mythic discourse” (2021a, p. 164). And, in an earlier article, Frog (2014) applies his conception of mythology to the modern world. He observes, for example, that the Big Bang is for most people not arrived at through a first-hand process adhering to scientific principles, but is an account of a cosmogenic event told by people whom they happen to trust (2014, p. 68). Philosopher of science and religion Mary-Jane Rubenstein (2014) makes precisely the same point:

We learned [the Big Bang theory] as children from communal leaders, it establishes a class of people (namely scientists) as having privileged access to a universal truth, and it reflects collective values. These include observability, cosmic autonomy, and truth itself—after all, this is *the story of the way things are*. (2014, p. 8)

In other words, the Big Bang theory is a myth in that belief in it is established through *discourse* that is naturalised based on the predominant mythic paradigms of the current sociocultural environment. The difference is that we have also mythologised science as oppositional to myth. (Previously, myth may have been construed as oppositional to religion, or simply not thought of at all.) Part of the mythology of science is that it is amythical—a myth of mythlessness—and this is part of what helps science naturalise its claims to truth.<sup>15</sup> The understanding of myth that informs Frog’s mythic discourse analysis is thus not limited to any specific cultural context or time period.

Crucially, this approach “provides a single framework for analyzing mythological texts, rituals, and descriptions of rituals, evidence in different media, and for considering combinations of mythic integers linked to different cultural or religious backgrounds” (2021a, p.

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<sup>15</sup> This is not to cast doubt on the scientific method itself. Rather, this point addresses the *discourse* surrounding science and why it is that scientists, in invoking this mythology of science, are able to engender trust. This is separate from whether or not science ‘works’ or really is an optimal path towards truth.

204). While stories are often some of our best-preserved evidence for cultures past, the study of folklore is also careful to acknowledge that they are not the only ways in which the lore of a particular folk comes to be (Frog & Ahola, 2021, p. 35). Folklore is a loose, distributed network of stories, songs, superstitions, beliefs, rituals, patterns of behaviour, taboos, and so on. Such a multiplicity is reflected in games which are constituted by various constellations of performance, narrative, space, visual image, sound, potentiality and rules. Games, as we know, can be extraordinarily different from one another: we talk of ‘narrative’ games such as *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013), which appear to have at their core a definable plot which we simply play through rather than watch or read, for example, but also of games like *Tetris* (Pajitnov & Pokhilko, 1984), where there is (arguably) no discernible narrative at all (Juul, 2001). Fortunately, “folklore is characterized by variation” (Frog & Ahola, 2021, p. 36; emphasis in original). Variation is not definitional to folklore, but rather occurs “as an outcome of social transmission” (2021, p. 36). When using a method that is agnostic to the channel of communication, the question of whether games are or are not, can or cannot be, can or cannot contain narratives becomes less urgent, because we can instead see all elements as interweaving and interdependent.

It is also important that Frog’s system hinges on the basic unit of the integer, and the integer is defined as relative: “a distinguishable unit (of whatever sort) ... an indicator that something is an integer is precisely the ability to talk about it as a unit” within a given cultural environment (2021a, p. 169). A meaningful integer is derived *from* the object of analysis, rather than being an absolute concept imposed *on* the object of analysis. This means that as a method it is adaptable to other contexts, because those other contexts will define what is a meaningful unit within them.

## 4.2 Barthesian myth

While Frog in part builds on Barthes, it is worth returning to *Mythologies* due to Barthes’ focus on myths of the everyday, of contemporary life, rather than ancient sources. Barthes stresses for example that mythology “is a part of both semiology inasmuch as it is a formal science, and of ideology inasmuch as it is an historical science: it studies ideas-in-form” (1972/2009, p. 135). This marks a small departure from the folklorist approach. Traditionally, folklore has been treated as the continuation of mythology (sometimes derivative, but more recently as continuation in its own right), though there is debate surrounding this.<sup>16</sup> Barthes is therefore useful for focusing on mythology as everyday and contemporary, which is important for a medium as young as videogames.

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<sup>16</sup> Frog and Joonas Ahola present a four-stage model of the development of this distinction (2021, pp. 50–51). Originally, the distinction was of “folklore as derivative of mythology and ritual” (2021, p. 50). Folklore is the scattered leftovers of a once-coherent mythology. Today we are in the fourth stage, in which “many scholars continue to use the term *folklore* as referring to post-medieval traditions, in which case relating folklore and Old Norse mythology is understood as involving a diachronic comparison between genetically or analogically related materials or traditions. Other scholars have advanced more fully to addressing the Old Norse traditions as folklore” (2021, p. 51).

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I have covered in more detail what Barthes' concept of myth is in '2 What is Myth?' and so here I will focus more on how a Barthesian myth analysis proceeds, though there will of course be some overlap and some core concepts bear restating. Let me begin by restating the semiological basis for the theory:

Language MYTH	1. Signifier	2. Signified	
	3. Sign		
	I. SIGNIFIER		II. SIGNIFIED
	III. SIGN		

Table 4. My recreation of Barthes' table visualising his system of myth in relation to semiotics (1972/2009, p. 138).

For Barthes, myth is a “*metalinguage*, because it is a second language, *in which* one speaks about the first” (1972/2009, p. 138), the first being the original *language-object*, the first-order signification. Barthes does not lay out any strict method for his kind of myth analysis. Julian McDougall makes the point that the theoretical essay, ‘Myth Today’, comes at the *end of Mythologies* and is therefore “written out of and after the active readings and thus serving them rather than being served by them” (2013, p. 4). It is not a “framework for the outset” in this way (McDougall, 2013, p. 4). Barthes’ treatment of contemporary myths is not systematically or thoroughly integrated with his general reflections on myth as such. This is one reason why it is important to consider and incorporate other methods into this project, like Frog’s mythic discourse analysis. These help to make the powerful concepts more applicable on a granular, operationalizable level.

Barthes uses as a key example the cover of *Paris Match* magazine number 326 (June 1955), depicting a young soldier from French colonial Africa (Burkina Faso, then Wagadugu Upper Volta). Barthes uses the term “*le nègre*” (1957, p. 201) to refer to the soldier, translated into English as “Negro” in the edition I use (1972/2009, p. 152). At least in the English, this is not a term that would be acceptable today, and I am hesitant even to reproduce it in quotation. However, Barthes’ use of the French term in 1957 and my discomfort reading the English translation in 2022 actually provides a useful demonstration of the changing nature of mythology, the importance of the *today* in ‘Myth Today’. I will return to this point, but will first address the following with that context established.

Barthes notes that he can produce three readings of a myth by focusing on either the meaning (the signifier of the original language-object), the form (the signifier of myth formed by the collapsing of the sign of the language-object), or both together (the myth as a whole). He writes:

1. If I focus on an empty signifier, I let the concept fill the form of the myth without ambiguity, and I find myself before a simple system, where the signification becomes literal again: the Negro who salutes is an example of French imperialty, he is a symbol for it. This type of focusing is, for instance, that of the producer of myths, of the journalist who starts with a concept and seeks a form for it.

2. If I focus on a full signifier, in which I clearly distinguish the meaning and the form, and consequently the distortion which the one imposes on the other, I undo the signification of the myth, and I receive the latter as an imposture: the saluting Negro becomes the alibi of French imperialty. This type of focusing is that of the mythologist: he deciphers the myth, he understands a distortion.

3. Finally, if I focus on the mythical signifier as on an inextricable whole made of meaning and form, I receive an ambiguous signification: I respond to the constituting mechanism of myth, to its own dynamics, I become a reader of myths. The saluting Negro is no longer an example or a symbol, still less an alibi: he is the very presence of French imperialty. (1972/2009, pp. 152–153)

It can be helpful to think of these different approaches through pronouns as a shorthand. The first is *we*, it focuses on what we all see, the literal, empty sign, what we cannot *not* see, the starting point where all readers are united. The second is *you*, separating oneself from the group by calling out what additional, arbitrary associations are attached to the basic sign which others do not see as such. The third is *I*, a necessarily subjective analysis of the myth as a whole: how does the myth appear to *me, now*?

Barthes states that the first two of these are “static, analytical; they destroy the myth, either by making its intention obvious, or by unmasking it: the former is cynical, the latter demystifying” (1972/2009, p. 153). Myth only works as a whole, and so by focusing on any one part of it—here either the naïve, literal meaning from which it begins, or the fully-formed sign prior to mythologisation—it is unpicked. Methodologically, with these two parts we are asking *what is the raw material being used for mythologisation?* and *can we identify at what point its signification becomes mythological?* By separating these elements, we can examine how a given mythology functions. Frog’s mythic discourse analysis helps to better lay out what an ‘element’ in this context is and how they relate to one another.

The third is “dynamic, it consumes the myth according to the very ends built into its structure: the reader lives the myth as a story at once true and unreal” (1972/2009, p. 153). Taking the title of the essay, ‘Myth Today’, Barthes connects the first two steps to the *myth* and the third to *today*:

If one wishes to connect a mythical schema to a general history, to explain how it corresponds to the interests of a definite society, in short, to pass from semiology to ideology, it is obviously at the level of the third type of focusing that one must place oneself: it is the reader of myths himself who much reveal their essential function. How does he receive this particular myth *today*? (1972/2009, p. 153)

With the mechanics and constitution of the myth deconstructed, we then reconstruct the myth in order to take a broader view. *Where is this myth situated in broader society? Where did it come from? How does it sit within even broader structures which we might call ideology?* These questions can only be answered with a consideration of the myth as a coherent whole.

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Particularly this last point is why, in this Barthesian mode of analysis, one must write myths oneself, subjective and uniquely positioned as each writer is. “With Barthes, you must participate: not reflect but engage”, writes Pete Bennett (2013, p. 146) in the closing essay to an edited volume that mirrors Barthes’ structure of a series of myths followed by the theoretical work. Because the process of mythologisation is never complete and always morphing, the analyst must consider their own position, here and now, as a *reader* of myth—their own relation to mythology.

Here I return to Barthes’ use of the term “Negro”. Considering this on the level of language, this example does not work mythologically *today*. The word is too charged and full of meaning.<sup>17</sup> It arrests me as I read it. This arresting quality means that such a linguistic expression actually does not work mythically; its discourse and ideology are too powerful and too obvious for the subtle process of naturalisation to take hold. This is an example of how myth in Barthes’ terms changes over time and depends on the reader. Things that may not originally have had a mythical quality may now have one, and vice versa. The effects and characteristics of a myth may change depending on its position within the broader system of mythologies. A myth may acquire new meanings, change its old ones, or lose its mythical qualities altogether.

Of Barthes’ three modes of reading here, it is the third that is most fruitful for my purposes. The first two are necessary analytical tools—what is the raw material of myth, and what are its mythological qualities?—but the focus of my mythic analyses is to bring these objects of study into a broader conversation through the cycle of myth I outline in the chapter ‘2 What is Myth?’. By analysing a game mythically, I am primarily interested in how mythology flows from the nebulous broader culture, into the game, and back into culture, how it connects with history, society and ideology.

Because myth is a process, a mode of parasitic signification, and not an object in itself, it can latch itself onto anything, theoretically. This is why in my approach I must be vague about what constitutes an ‘element’, and why Frog’s integers can likewise be anything from the minutest, barest sign to an entire narrative arc. Mythology begins by flattening its object into *form*. Barthes demonstrates this with a comparison. On the one hand, the concept of a *tree*. This simple sign is so vague and abstract that it is open to “a halo of virtualities where other possible meanings are floating” (1972/2009, p. 157). *Tree* as form has much space to be filled by myth, which we can see in its rich metaphorical life: environment, ecology, the family tree, the world tree in various traditions, the tree of knowledge, leaves as stories plucked from the great tree of stories, and so on.

On the other hand, “when the meaning is too full for myth to be able to invade it, myth goes around it, and carries it away bodily” (1972/2009, p. 157). The example Barthes gives here is the famous formula  $E = mc^2$ . For Barthes, “mathematical language is a *finished* language, which derives its very perfection from this acceptance of death” (1972/2009, p. 158). By “perfect” and “finished”, he means that its signification is complete and closed. It allows

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<sup>17</sup> It is worth reminding here that I am primarily reading Annette Lavers’ English translation (1972/2009). I am not familiar with whether and to what extent the original French term is similarly charged today.

for no further interpretation, no additional meaning.  $E = mc^2$  has a definite, unalterable and complete meaning. Instead of impregnating the meaning of the equation itself, then, myth “makes of this unalterable meaning the pure signifier of mathematicity” (1972/2009, p. 157). That is, the very fact that it refuses additional signification becomes itself part of the mythology of mathematics *as such*. Its resistance to myth contributes to the naturalisation of mathematics as being perfect, true, singularly interpretable, universal and pure. The equation as a whole is carried by myth.

Yet, in which way is Barthes’ concept of mythology useful for the study of digital games? Barthes, unsurprisingly, did not write about digital games. But, applying the above to games, we could consider the vagueness of the videogame gun as a sign, malleable to countless contexts: *Portal*’s (Valve, 2007a) portal gun or *Team Fortress 2*’s (Valve, 2007b) Medi Gun, a super-realistic M16 assault rifle. Or the completeness of the joystick, an unimpregnable sign that comes to signify gaming as a whole. Or something more ambiguous, like the aliens in *Space Invaders* (Taito, 1978), in-game extremely vague, but who as a symbol come to represent the genre as a whole as well as retro games. More examples of these will arise in my game analyses.

Barthes also stress the multichannel, media-agnostic nature of myth. When Barthes says that myth is a type of “speech” (1972/2009, p. 131), he uses the term broadly: “any significant unit or synthesis, whether verbal or visual: a photograph will be a kind of speech for us in the same way as a newspaper article; even objects will become speech, if they mean something” (1972/2009, p. 133). This description fits neatly with Frog’s development of mythic integers, which could likewise be described as any significant unit, regardless of channel. Furthermore, in reflecting later on *Mythologies*, Barthes remarks that “contemporary myth is discontinuous. It is no longer expressed in long fixed narratives but only in ‘discourse’; at most, it is a *phraseology*, a corpus of phrases (of stereotypes); myth disappears, but leaving—so much the more insidious—the *mythical*” (1977, p. 165). The turn away from a solely narrative focus in studies of mythology and folklore (cf. Ahola & Frog, 2021, pp. 14, 23–24) reveals an error in Barthes’ implication that myth was once expressed (primarily) in “long fixed narratives”. But his observation of the *mythical* over the *myth* here is key when considering digital games.

Two practicable examples of Barthes’ come to mind with relation to digital games. The first is music. In his discussion of music composition and Ludwig van Beethoven, Barthes makes the following remark:

To compose, at least by propensity, is *to give to do*, not to give to hear but to give to write. The modern location for music is not the concert hall, but the stage on which the musicians pass, in what is often a dazzling display, from one source of sound to another. It is we who are playing, though still it is true by proxy; but one can imagine the concert—later on?—as exclusively a workshop, from which nothing spills over—no dream, no imaginary, in short, no ‘soul’ and where all the musical art is absorbed in a praxis *with no remainder*.  
(1977, pp. 153–154)

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This is the difference between what Barthes describes as the “two musics ... the music one listens to, [and] the music one plays” (1977, p. 149). The music one listens to is complete, it is a performance in the past. The music one plays has a future, it is yet to be played. While musical notation is in some ways comparable to the perfect, closed language of mathematics discussed previously, it is in other ways very incomplete, very open.

This incomplete, future-implying mode of signification resembles games quite strongly. Take Nguyen’s description of games as the art of agency:

[Games] are a method for inscribing forms of agency into artifactual vessels: for recording them, preserving them, and passing them around. And we possess a special ability: we can be fluid with our agency; we can submerge ourselves in alternate agencies designed by another. In other words, we can use games to communicate forms of agency. (2020, p. 1)

Like musical notation, games in Nguyen’s depiction describe, suggest and imply how they *should be* played, without the already-having-done-ness of other media. Each pianist’s *fortissimo* will sound different from one another’s, just as each *Super Mario Bros.* player’s Mario will run and jump in a different manner.

The second practicable example is Barthes’ essay in *Mythologies* on ‘Toys’. Barthes observes the distinction that toys are for children and not for adults, a distinction which for the most part would hold today, but perhaps not as strongly (see, for example, the prevalence and success of increasingly complex and expensive Lego sets). He argues that toys essentially function as a microcosm for the adult world, and the child who plays with them is therefore “nothing but a smaller man, a homunculus to whom must be supplied objects of his own size” (1972/2009, p. 57). Toys in this way have the function of training children to accept as natural the adult world they will grow into:

The fact that French toys *literally* prefigure the world of adult functions cannot but prepare the child to accept them all, by constituting for him, even before he can think about it, the alibi of a Nature which has at all times created soldiers, postmen and Vespas. Toys here reveal the list of all the things the adult does not find unusual: war, bureaucracy, ugliness, Martians, etc. (1972/2009, p. 57)

Being constituted as the subject of *play* has its own naturalising effect. If we can *play* with a toyified or gamified version of something literal and real, it domesticates it and makes it unremarkable. Bogost (2011) makes this argument of games in general, that over time they become demystified and domesticated, a “mixed blessing. On the one hand, it allows broader reach and scale. It means that more people can understand and manipulate a medium. ... On the other hand, it makes a once exotic, wild medium tame and uninteresting” (2011, p. 150). We may apply domestication also to individual genres and subject matters. Growing up and playing a seemingly endless ream of *Call of Duty*, *Medal of Honor* and *Battlefield* games normalises and naturalises war. This is not to stray into the dangerous territory of claiming that videogames *cause* aggression or violence or this or that or the other (see Ferguson & Wang, 2021). The effect is more abstract and cultural: it naturalises the *concept* of war. War is a thing

that *just happens*. Even in the many (*many*) games in which the horrors of war are foregrounded, the ignobility, the desperation, the futility, the idea of war *happening* is very seldom questioned. War never *changes*, as the *Fallout* series reminds us every time, but it is always unquestionably *there*. One could even trace this naturalisation of war into the very DNA of digital games as a whole. Many scholars position *Dungeons & Dragons* as a grand-parent of digital games (Stang & Trammell, 2019, p. 13; Vossen, 2020, p. 43), and Jon Peterson's (2012) expansive history of *Dungeons & Dragons* traces roleplaying back through wargaming and *Kriegsspiel* to chess as a military simulation. Even aside from the fantasy genre, which *Dungeons & Dragons* most obviously influences, many early digital games were based on war of some kind, such as *Spacewar!* (Russell, 1962), *Space Invaders* (Taito, 1978) and *Tank* (Kee Games, 1974).

Methodologically, then, through Barthes there are three main considerations. The first is of a media-agnostic Barthesian analysis of mythology. This may range from the game's visual depiction to its sound to the spatial layout of its world, its heroes to its monsters and structures of narrative. The second is the performative aspect of play, the futurity inherent in the construction of games specifically as opposed to other, constative media. The third is in the mythological considerations of play *as such*. What does play itself mean in each context, and what does it mean for something to be the subject of play? Addressing these three aspects using hermeneutics and mythic discourse analysis provides various levels of granularity, from a close reading of individual aspects to broader ideas about the game as a whole. This is necessary because mythologisation is a process and one which flattens, and so to address the cycle of mythology in culture it is necessary to synthesise close readings with macro considerations.

## 4.3 Hermeneutics

Here I outline my procedure of analysis. Essentially: how do I arrive at what I claim to be the mythology of/in a game? How do I approach and analyse my examples, step-by-step, in order to produce arguments regarding cultural meaning-making? Hermeneutics here sits as the method for my granular, textual analysis. Barthes' mythology would be the overarching direction for the project—the interrogation of digital game mythologies today—Frog's mythic discourse analysis provides a more operationalizable method for examining how myths are constructed and how they emerge from historical traditions, and hermeneutics is the process of analysis by which I arrive at the myths and mythologies I discuss.

The hermeneutic process is one that becomes ingrained and rather uninterrogated by humanists, myself included. Michał Kłosiński (2022) has recently provided a useful and clear guide to how this process often goes, or a template for how such analyses could proceed in the analysis of digital games. Published in 2022, I of course cannot claim that Kłosiński's guide specifically was one that I followed from the beginning of this project. However, it does outline many of those ingrained steps that I took in my analyses and has also been a useful guide for reassessing my analyses when redrafting.

Kłosiński follows the hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur, citing the fruitful use of his theories within game studies already:

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Following the positive reception of Ricoeur's works in game studies, this guide presents a general process of interpretation, tailored to be used with digital games, as they pose a set of media-specific challenges—because they are configurable, interactive and rule-based. These challenges are related to the way games engage human beings existentially, which has required the introduction of concepts describing differences between engagement in play and post play. Thus, the procedure delineated in this article aligns itself with previous findings in that it tries to identify and describe the crucial steps in preparing oneself for the interpretative process that occurs in play and post play. (2022)

For Kłosiński, “the process of hermeneutic interpretation is dependent on the identification and reconstruction of the causal and meaning nexuses” (2022), as distinct from application and critique. As such, this approach is suitable for the process of trying to understand what a particular mythology is *constituted of*, as well as its genealogical relation to meaning nexuses into the past. In the following, I go through Kłosiński’s ten steps, describing how each relates more specifically to this project.

### Gameplay

“Play the game!” Kłosiński (2022) summarises. Early in the development of game studies, Aarseth (2003) established the methodological importance of playing the game for *understanding* it, alongside other, nonplaying approaches. For Arjoranta’s (2015, 2022) real-time hermeneutics, the act of playing a game is vital to the process of interpreting it. Kłosiński argues that “to play is to enable both the conscious and unconscious processes of perception and understanding” (2022).

What does this mean in practice? Primarily, it means playing the game and providing as much documentation as possible for one’s thoughts while playing. Notes, recordings, keeping savefiles and so on are all ways of doing this. When I play, I take notes. Since Summer 2020 I have recorded all of my gameplay, and since longer ago I have taken screenshots of parts of games that grabbed my attention. These processes have not been as systematic for each game. Some are games I first played as a child or a teenager, when I was not quite so cognizant of the need for a robust real-time hermeneutic procedure. While I have replayed all of these games during the project, there is of course a difference in playing a game for the first time compared with a second (or third, or fourth...) time, as well as the potential influence of nostalgia and memory (for a more thorough treatment of the concepts of (un)repeatability and (un)replayability in games, see Imbierowicz, 2021; Monedero March, 2019).

I noted earlier that one does not *need* to play a game to produce an interpretation of it. That still holds true. In my view, interpretations are refined and additional interpretations are produced through play, and so it makes sense for me to play the games in an in-depth study such as this. It is also worth bearing in mind, however, that (a) there is much discourse surrounding games based on *other people*’s interpretations, and (b) at least some people in the wider discourse produce interpretations about games they have not played. This is not a claim I can substantiate, but with the quantity of interpretations I feel on relatively safe

ground. While *my* interpretations are produced at least partially through play, when considering the wider discourse these non-played elements enter in too and can coexist. This leads to the next stage.

### **Distanciation**

The second stage moves from a real-time consideration of the game-as-event to a retrospective, reflective consideration of the game-as-text. “This procedure objectifies the game as a configured text of culture, and as such arrests its situations and events into a descriptive framework of analytical discourse” (2022).

Crucially, Kłosiński argues, distanciation is what allows us to see “that the way we have played the game is not the only way” (2022). Depending on the game, we might look at the styles of play that we did not try, the endings we did not see, the character builds we did not use, the optional areas we did not have time to explore, the choices we did not make. This is done by consulting a variety of third-party resources produced by other players of the game: reviews, reflections, livestreams, Let’s Plays, guides, wikis, discussions, interviews and so on. Anything which grants insight into the individual play experiences of *other* players. For Kłosiński, this “enables the analyst to relate their own perspective toward what others have written or said about the game” (2022).

In my process, this is frequently applied. Precisely how depends on the game and my conditions of play. For games with branching narratives or paths, I will sometimes replay the game, and sometimes watch videos or read guides on the paths I did not take instead. For vast, open-world games like *Skyrim*, where playing all the content is not usually feasible, I will likewise watch videos or read guides that delve into the content I did not encounter. Throughout this thesis, I make extensive use of game wikis for basic information of many of the games. (Particularly helpful are searchable databases of in-game text and dialogue.) In addition, I comment on how my own playstyle might be relevant to the interpretations I have reached.

Perhaps most visibly (due to citation), in building my interpretation I consider, synthesise and use the reflections and critique of others. This includes sources from casual discourse about games on platforms like Twitter and Reddit, discussions with friends and colleagues, journalistic reviews and features, videoessays and scholarly work.

### **Confronting prejudice**

When we approach games, we do so with a set of prior expectations. For example, as a keen player of FromSoftware games, when *Elden Ring* (2022) was released, I had a firm set of expectations for the worldbuilding, story and gameplay, even though I had intentionally been avoiding trailers or pre-release writeups and interviews. Conversations with friends and colleagues who were not such keen FromSoftware players revealed that others had a different set of expectations based much more on the popular discourse surrounding the developer’s previous games. Trying to escape prejudice entirely and approach the game as an entirely objective observer with no preconceptions is a fantasy. Instead, Kłosiński recommends that researchers confront their own prejudices, list them, and turn them rather into hypotheses than remaining as judgement (2022).

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Due to some of the factors listed previously, I have not done this so systematically. However, this point forms part of my overall reflection on my analyses. When analysing, I am careful to ask how my various experiences and positionalities may have impacted the way I played and understood the game. What are my biases? How typical can my experience be said to be? These self-reflective questions inform my analyses, at times explicitly but always implicitly.

### Summary

In order to “position [the game] in relation to other cultural texts cultural practices [*sic*] in general” (2022), Kłosiński recommends gathering together the game’s cultural and industrial context. This includes a broad summary of the game and how it works, as well as who developed the game and how it was received. While he concedes that not all of this information is always useful or relevant, “some might turn to be valuable when reconstructing causal and meaning nexuses. Summarizing helps us translate the game into our own story about the game” (2022).

If my analyses seek to situate mythic meaning-making within a cycle that moves through culture over time, then situating the game in its sociocultural context is vital. Who made the game and why, for example, tells us a lot about what mythologies, past and present, might be being drawn on. Which games are lauded and for what reasons can also say a lot about how a game’s treatment of mythologies might feed back into culture.

### Problematization

For Kłosiński, “summary converges with the formulation of a problem, or with mapping different problems of the interpreted game” (2022). Problem here is defined broadly and depends on one’s theoretical background and approach. In his example of *Elden Ring*, Kłosiński identifies design-oriented problems including “the game is too difficult; its interface design interferes with immersion”, but also more analytical problems such as “the game problematizes post-heroic times” and “the game problematizes thanopolitics” (2022).

Often when a mythology is undermined, exposed or brought into question, it appears as a problem, as something unresolved, a stand-out issue. In my analysis of *Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice*, I show that by presenting and putting into conflict two mythologies of mental illness (as inner demons to be cast out, and as superpower or ‘sixth sense’), the game brings both prominent constructions into question. In my analyses, it is not only about the mythologies that are drawn on and how they are used, but also about the relations that are constructed *between* mythologies, and the hierarchies, causalities and conflicts that arise as a result.

### Reconstruction

The sixth stage asks us to reconstruct those causal and meaning nexuses that Kłosiński has mentioned a number of times. It asks us how meanings are produced in the game. As such, it is a broad and necessarily difficult-to-define stage, because it depends so intimately on how the game *works*. This entails looking at symbols, metaphors, intertextual and transmedia

relations, mechanics, writing, narrative, spatial construction and so on, and in particular how these elements might work in tandem (2022).

For my purposes, reconstruction entails reconstructing the mythologies present in the game, historical and fictional (or emulated). Using mythic discourse analysis, it becomes possible to map out coherent mythic integers, motifs and themes that can freely combine the different aspects Kłosiński discusses.

### Suspicion

The “reverse side of reconstruction” (2022), suspicion moves from reconstructing what meaning is positively (re)presented to what is hidden. It involves looking at the negative space: what is not (re)presented? What is not questioned? What is missing that could have been there?

This step is crucial to myth analysis, particularly in the Barthesian tradition, because myth’s purpose is to “transform history into nature” (Barthes, 1972/2009, p. 154). Myth takes that which is represented, postulated, argued for, proposed, and attempts instead to imitate basic reality, masking that true reality in the process. This step is therefore crucial—perhaps more so than any other—for mythic discourse analysis. What is being presented in the game as basic reality? What goes unquestioned? What is presented as uncontroversial? One of the central goals of my study is to better approach these questions through myth.

### Theoretical coupling

For Kłosiński, the next step is to establish which theoretical framework(s) to apply. It is impossible to conduct a fully comprehensive analysis that covers every possible angle, and so the theoretical coupling sets out from which angle *this* analysis will approach the game. What features will be brought into focus? What questions asked? This stage focuses and sharpens the interpretation, producing a (hopefully) coherent argument.

This project ultimately employs a wide variety of theoretical lenses, because excavating the various mythologies may require theoretical frameworks suited to different and specific fields. For example, feminist theoretical frameworks are useful in uncovering how mythologies surrounding women and gender are constructed, while the philosophy of evil helps examine how various mythological constructions of evil and monstrosity are constituted. On a broader level, however, my theoretical approaches are laid out in this chapter and in the two previous chapters.

### Existential inquiry

This more introspective step “focuses on the transformative functions of digital games, the power that play—as a cultural practice—holds over the individual” (2022). This is done by reflecting on what the game did to the researcher themselves, “a process invested in describing the metamorphosis of the subjectivity, existence and identity of the researcher as a player (and indubitably culturally defined by gender, class, ethnicity, religion, history, etc.)” (2022).

I do not shy away from ‘I’ in my analyses. While the purpose of understanding games through myth and mythic discourse is to situate games’ meaning-making within broader culture, it is important to recognise that *I* perform the analysis and that *I* identify these

mythologies and situate them in their context. It is worth recalling Barthes' (1972/2009, p. 153) emphasis on the subjective individual who reads myth from *their* perspective *today*. Existential inquiry is important both as caveat and context for that, as well as being a useful avenue for analysis in its own right, one which can also uncover particular mythologies.

### Testing interpretative hypotheses

Finally, interpretative hypotheses need to be tested. How they are tested depends, of course, on what kinds of hypotheses they are. Some questions can be answered empirically, and so the hypothesis is confirmed or rejected on the basis of the evidence produced. Others cannot be answered empirically: their test is more in presentation to an interpretative community, where “in relation to other interpretations, ours will either be accepted, rejected or give grounds for an emerging critique” (2022).

From here, the method is in your hands, reader. Arguments such as those made in this thesis are accepted, discarded and built upon based on whether and in what ways their readers find them convincing and useful. This can only be done once the work is out in the world in some form. Some sections in this dissertation build on work I have presented at conferences and seminars previously, which has helped to test and sharpen the ideas. Whether it works as a whole, however, well, the proof is in the pudding.

## 4.4 Summary

Mytholudics is built on three pillars: mythic discourse analysis, Barthesian mythology and hermeneutics. Barthesian myth provides the basis for mythology as a process and a form, rather than any particular object or kind of object, and outlines the role of the ‘reader’ of myth. Mythic discourse analysis operationalises this broad understanding of myth for analytical purposes, and in particular to facilitate comparison between games and across time. Hermeneutics describes the process by which I interpret the games, using the other two pillars as a framework and to give focus and direction to interpretations.

My game analyses are organised essentially as a series of mini essays in which each heading designates another mythology or intertwined set of mythologies. These highlight a particular slice of the game or series, focusing on a specific mythological construction, such as the mythology of the elite soldier, magical languages, demons, and so on. Each game analysis concludes with a discussion in which these different mini essays are synthesised. How do they relate to each other? Are there hierarchies in place, whereby some mythologies seem to be instantiated primarily to reinforce another? In this discussion, I try to arrive at the semantic centre (Schjødt, 2013) or meaning nexus: what do all these mythologies, taken together in the organising structure of the game, seem to orbit? This might be a particular model of heroism, where all aspects of the game seem to converge on reinforcing a particular kind of hero, as in *Call of Duty*. Or, as in *Senua’s Sacrifice*, it may be that the mythologies used are organised around a central clash between two contradictory mythologies of psychosis.

A mytholudic analysis is an iterative process. In producing the following ten game/game series analyses, the headings and argumentative structures have changed a dizzying number

of times. This is because all of these analyses began with hypotheses. When beginning my analysis of *Call of Duty*, for instance, I began with my prejudices: it's *Call of Duty*, it's about war in some way, the characters the player controls seem in general to be depicted heroically, they are successful in achieving their military goals, most of the friendly interaction is between the squad, while relationships with higher-ups often seem fraught and sometimes there is betrayal, etc., etc. From these hunches, I try to produce headings that will guide the analysis of a particular mythology. For example, in *Call of Duty* the mythology of the elite, special forces soldier. In the process of writing this analysis, I am testing these interpretative hypotheses. Very often, this analysis won't quite seem to work. Figuring out why sharpens it. Perhaps I find that the mythology is not at all what I thought it would be, upon closer examination. Perhaps I am really describing two mythologies that should be treated separately, or perhaps this section is actually a small constitutive part of another. Perhaps there are internal contradictions within the game or series—in which case, why is that? Perhaps this seems to be referencing a topic I know little about, in which case I need to follow that up. It is vital for this method to produce analyses which are improved, iterated upon, or even discarded. This is true for many humanistic methods, but it is worth stressing. What is written on the page is not the write-up of the results of the method, it *is* the method in practice.

The games selected for analysis were not intended to be comprehensive or fully representative of any genre or of games as a whole. Rather, some games were selected as 'challenges' to the method. For example, *Call of Duty* and *Doom* were chosen with the prejudice that they would be, from a mythological standpoint, very straightforward. *Call of Duty* presents a war hero, who knew?! However, these would at least provide a baseline for the more selective examples, and would also show what insights can be gained from an analysis of the obvious. In practice, these examples would turn out to be in any case much more complex. The particular workings of how the hero-myth in *Call of Duty* is constructed, often in unintuitive ways, is fascinating and leads to many other potential avenues. The more 'selective' games are then those which seem to intentionally do something against the grain or particularly stand-out. *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* and *Heaven's Vault* are examples of that, where the hermeneutic prejudice was that these games attempt to do something starkly different: *Senua's Sacrifice* with its explicit clash of Norse and Pictish mythologies combined with the depiction of psychosis; *Heaven's Vault* with its nonviolence and much-praised depiction of archaeology and linguistics. For me, it is also promising that I never had to abandon any game analysis wholesale because it was going nowhere and producing nothing of interest. Even if there was a great deal of iteration and restructuring of the analyses, I was always able to extract novel insights using the method outlined here, no matter the game or series.

It is also worth addressing my use of examples and references to illustrate points, which may (uncharitably) seem to haphazardly lurch from 'pop' culture to 'high' culture. I refer to works from *Finding Nemo* (Stanton, 2003) to *Jekyll and Hyde* (Stevenson, 1886/2003), *Doctor Who* (Newman et al., 1963–2022) to epic classical poetry. This is for a number of reasons. One is that I reject the arbitrary distinction between 'pop' and 'high' culture. Another, more importantly, is that examining mythologies in flux means observing how they move *through* culture. Mythologies move through culture via all forms. Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (1818/1993) is considered a classic of literature, a defining novel of Gothic horror and an

#### 4 Methods

early science-fiction story. But the integers, motifs and themes of *Frankenstein* and its own influences also percolate in the MMORPG *RuneScape* (Jagex, 2001) as a comedic quest, ‘Creature of Fenkenstrain’, parodied in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (Sharman, 1975) and referenced in the Alice Cooper song ‘Teenage Frankenstein’ (1987). And the ways that a myth percolates do not always preserve the nuances and richness of the original text (which itself is influenced by many other things). Sometimes it appears as a very basic caricature. Frankenstein can become a basic sign of the artificial monster. Jekyll and Hyde come to stand simply for two-facedness. Understanding how a mythology exists in society today, from my position, means observing both the key inflection points and rich texts that shape it, as well as the many diverse ways in which it is used in all sorts of cultural works, as is in keeping with the Barthesian tradition.

With the understanding of myth and the method by which my analyses proceeds laid out, we can now move to the example analyses themselves. There are ten in total, five each for the lenses of heroism and monstrosity. These lenses are not in themselves essential for mytholudic analysis, but can be very useful in guiding what can otherwise be a very open path. We know from play and games themselves that restrictions and guidelines can help rather than hinder creativity and ideas. These lenses also invite zooming even further out to consider whether these analyses end up telling us anything about discourses of heroism and monstrosity as such.

# 5 HEROES

A *hero* is the mythologisation of a ‘great individual’—a person who is attributed extraordinary, positive feats. Individuals can display heroism, or conduct themselves heroically, but it is in the noun ‘hero’ that we can fully appreciate the mythologisation at work. That is because when we label someone a ‘hero’, turning the adjective to a noun, we also attempt to change it from discourse to ontology. The perception of them is no longer based on individual heroic acts or heroism in a particular situation; they *are* a hero, fundamentally, essentially, definitionally.

This shift from discourse to nature has widespread consequences within a broader mythology wherein the hero often becomes central. The hero, the great individual, is found in the very earliest stories and artworks that we can make sense of. And the world’s most enduring such works are indelibly connected to the names of the heroes they depict, if their name is not already (part of) the title: Gilgamesh, Heracles, Atalanta, Boudicca, Beowulf, Sun Wukong. These are heroes who would more colloquially be called mythical, not least because of the very scarcely substantiated claims regarding their historicity. But we do the same with more historically well-attested figures who receive similar worship (though not without political contention): Alexander the Great, Joan of Arc, Mahatma Gandhi, Winston Churchill, John F. Kennedy, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr., Che Guevara, Greta Thunberg and so on. Elevating these figures to heroes can then often reshape the events for which they are known, placing them retroactively at the centre. For Brits like me, Churchill is taught (both formally in schools but also in a broader sense) as the orbital centre of the Second World War, the titanic, stalwart, unflinching hero who alone saved Europe from the Nazis. Other countries take a different view, considering Churchill less significant and elevating their own wartime leaders, such as Joseph Stalin in Russia—where he remains a broadly celebrated figure (‘Joseph Stalin’, 2019)—and Franklin D. Roosevelt in the US.<sup>18</sup>

Regardless of the extent to which either claim (or any other) is historically ‘true’, each nation’s perception of the war becomes centred around its heroic figures. This centring is apparent, for example, in the other events that are given prominence in a particular cultural milieu: the Battle of Britain, the Normandy Landings, the Battle of Berlin, the attack on Pearl Harbour, the Fall of Singapore, Operation Barbarossa, and so on. Most would agree that each of these events (and more) is crucial, but in Britain, for example, one is much more likely to know about, hear about, and experience art and media about the Battle of Britain than of Operation Barbarossa or the Battle of Stalingrad.

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<sup>18</sup> Though not referring to the leaders themselves, an example of the difference can be seen in opinion polling. For example, a YouGov poll asking “in your opinion, which one country would you say most contributed most to the defeat of Germany in World War Two?” found that countries differ quite widely in whether they believe the US, the UK or the USSR (or another country) was chiefly responsible for Allied victory (Jordan, 2015).

This centring of the hero, of reading history *through* its heroes is itself a mythology, a mythologisation of heroism per se. It mythologises heroism as a natural, pre-hoc aspect of humanity, rather than as a post-hoc discursive label. People do heroic acts *because they are heroes*, rather than people become labelled as heroes *because they do heroic acts*, or, more cynically, because their community needs a personified centre to rally around. And it is *because of these heroes* that important things happen. (As we shall see, models of what constitutes heroes and heroism are varied, but this is one quite fundamental distinction.) This is essentially 19<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Thomas Carlyle's 'great man theory':

Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at the bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here. They were the leaders of men, these great ones ... all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realisation and embodiment, of Thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world: the soul of the whole world's history, it may justly be considered, were the history of these. (1841/1901, pp. 1–2)

Carlyle's thesis, while plainly sexist and Eurocentric, is nonetheless pervasive to this day. He identifies six heroic archetypes: divinity (e.g., Odin), prophet (Mohammad), poet (Shakespeare), priest (Luther), man of letters (Rousseau), and king (Napoleon). And the way we typically conceive of historical periods and religious, ideological movements follows this line of thinking. We talk of the *Napoleonic Wars*, the *Victorian era*, Lutheranism. Indeed, the impulse is so strong that the objects of hero-worship often have no say in it. In a well-known speech, Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg said, "this is all wrong. I shouldn't be up here. I should be back in school on the other side of the ocean. Yet you all come to us young people for hope. How dare you!" (2019). Two years later, at the University of Winchester, a life-sized statue of Thunberg was revealed (Mehta, 2021).

In many models of heroism, such reluctance or refusal is vital. In Campbell's Hero's Journey, for instance, the hero must always first refuse the call. Perhaps, cowed by the enormity of the collective action and organisation necessary, we want history to be defined by great individuals so they can do that work on our behalf, and out of this desire we use hero-worship as a way of *producing* heroes. This goes too for the desperate hope that climate change will be solved by the 'techbro heroes' of our time like Elon Musk. This desire to look for great individuals can also be seen even in spaces where community and collective action is supposedly championed over the centrality of the individual. In the UK and the US, for instance, the project of left-wing politics since the mid-2010s has focused on catapulting unlikely figureheads like Bernie Sanders and Jeremy Corbyn to the very highest positions, possibly to the detriment of a more ground-up approach of collective action and building support on the lower rungs of the countries' legislatures and executives.

How does the hero as a mythologised figure relate to games? In games as in other art-forms, we find a variety of heroic models that derive from the existing models of heroism in culture. In addition to dissecting and analysing these aspects, in games we need to relate the hero to the playable figure or figures. In more constative media like film or literature, there is already the difficulty of disentangling the protagonist from the hero. While the two are

often one and the same, a character like Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho* (Ellis, 1991), for example, is a protagonist yet not a hero by any stretch of the imagination (or the concept). The distinction can be more fluid or ambiguous. In *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald, 1925/1950), is the narrator, Nick Carraway, the hero, or is Jay Gatsby? Or is neither a hero? And who is the protagonist? In many screenwriting guides, the main character is also considered distinct from both the protagonist and the hero. In most definitions, the main character represents the perspective through which the storyworld is seen, the protagonist is the character whose development is the main driver for the plot, and the hero is some kind of ideal, the character whose goals we want to see achieved and who overcomes the great threat of the plot (Hellerman, 2019). By these definitions, in the film adaptation *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory* (Stuart, 1971), Charlie is the main character, from whose perspective events unfold, but Willy Wonka is the protagonist, as it is his development arc that primarily drives the plot. These two or three character roles become further complicated in games, in which the playable figure can represent yet another role, distinct—theoretically at least—from all the others.

So the many understandings of heroes must be married with the act of play and the structure of gameworlds. It must not be assumed that every playable figure is a hero. Rather, the reasons why the two roles very often overlap should be interrogated. Further, how do the various mythologies of heroism square with the fact that in many games the hero is not a ‘someone else’ who is read about, but an entity controlled by the player? Does this modality afford different mythological configurations or challenges?

What follows is first a literature review, building a picture of various understandings of heroes and heroisms. The purpose here is not to paint a comprehensive picture of the history of the concept of heroism, but rather to identify a number of central theories and constructions of heroism, in particular those types of heroism which will afterwards be shown to be important in both the culture of digital games (to the extent such a thing exists) and in the cultures in which the chosen examples exist. Particularly the relationship between hero and myth will be relevant: has heroism always been seen as a mythic category? Some (particularly more recent) theories of heroism seem to be explicitly demythologising, which I also explore. Following that, I sketch out some of the broader hero-types that appear in most of the games I study in various ways: the *hero-victim*, the *hero-sceptic*, the *preordained hero* and the *unsung hero*. These broad types correspond to some of the most prominent strands of heroic thinking and do not aim to be an exhaustive typology, but an identification of frequent manifestations of heroism found in games. Finally, game examples follow, where I apply the understandings of heroism to games using myth analysis.

Primarily, the aim of this chapter is to examine the role that myth plays in constructing role models, idealised individuals. It is, in contrast to the chapter on monsters, about the construction of positive, aspirational mythologies. How does myth construct the *ideal* subject, the manifestation of traits and values that the mythologiser wants to naturalise?

## 5.1 A literature review of heroic thinking

Here I provide a brief overview of some of the key strands of the philosophy of heroism. It is an enormous and diverse topic, so any literature review I can provide will be incomplete. Instead, this can be thought of as the strands of thought on heroism that have informed the concept as I use it in this chapter. I arrive at a conception of heroism that it is a discursive strategy that works by mythologising an individual in an idealised, positive way. The character of that mythologisation is drawn from the theories that I discuss here.

### Homeric and Socratic heroes

One of the earliest treatments of heroism we have is in the work of Plato and Socrates. For Plato, the importance of the hero is as a role model for society. They play a crucial role in developing a man's *thumos* ('spiritedness'). Furthermore, the crux of Plato's treatment is his ambivalence towards the Homeric heroes (Hobbs, 2000, p. xii). Of stories of Achilles, Plato says that they may have their use, but are not good aspirational material for soldiers (2004, p. 67). If every soldier acted like Achilles but without his divine ability, the Achaean army would have been utter chaos. Dominic Stefanson also points out another hinderance to the Homeric hero as a broader societal role model, that it seems "only a male aristocrat can be a hero" in Homeric tales (2004, p. 35). We could take this further than the aristocracy too, as many of the Homeric heroes are also demi-gods or can trace lineage to the Olympians. The ancient Greek term *hērōs* seemed originally to mean 'demi-god' (Harper, n.d.-a).

Instead, Plato puts forth Socrates as the ideal moral hero. This is in contrast to the prevailing view at the time that the philosopher "was thoroughly self-interested and was, therefore, not a contributing member of the political community" (Kohen, 2011, p. 49). Plato's task in the *Republic*, therefore, is to claim that the philosopher is not only more than a self-interested, non-contributing member of society, but rather the very best of society who should be emulated. "Whereas the Homeric hero achieved his heroic status primarily through his actions, the philosopher reaches heroic peaks through contemplation and cerebral control of visceral desires", writes Stefanson (2004, p. 95). And, crucially, "philosophical insight translates directly into excellence in any human endeavour, including areas beyond the reach of the Homeric hero, especially ... the realm of political activity in the *polis*" (2004, pp. 95–96).

However, for our purposes here, it is important to note that Plato is not talking about heroism as such, but rather arguing for one kind of heroism as a better role model than another. He does not argue that Achilles is *not* a hero, just one we should not emulate. Still, what we glean from this treatment of the Homeric hero and the proposal of the philosopher-hero is that the hero is taken to be a role model, someone one should admire, if not aspire to be like. (After all, it is difficult to actively 'aspire' to receive divine assistance and to be born of noble lineage, but such a person can nonetheless be admired. Even if we accept Plato's argument that Achilles is not someone whose behaviour is desirable—his actions in the *Iliad* are ultimately selfish, and he comes to his comrades' aid only out of revenge—his

extraordinariness can still be admired, much in the vein of today's popular anti-heroes.) And, furthermore, we glean that heroism is seen as a property of the individual. It is something either inherent or nurtured within a single person, as opposed to being a property of a community. Finally, Plato shows us the paradox of heroism that can arise from the former two points: that while the hero is seen as a role model for one to become more like, only a very few can sustainably actually be heroes.

## Rousseau

The philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau provides another prominent and recognisable theory of heroism in 1751. For Rousseau, the hero "is the work of nature, fortune, and himself" (1997, p. 305). They are not necessarily one who "possesses all the virtues", rather "the Hero makes up for the virtues he lacks by the splendor of those he possesses" (1997, p. 305). Rousseau then argues against many of the traits that would commonly be associated with heroism:

Let it, therefore, no longer be said that the palm of Heroism belongs only to valor and the military talents. It is not by their exploits that the reputation of great men is measured. The vanquished have carried off the reward of glory a hundred times more often than have the victors. (1997, p. 310)

The virtuous man is just, prudent, moderate, without being a Hero for all that, and all too frequently the Hero is none of all that. Let us not hesitate to concede it; often Heroism has owed its splendor to its very contempt for these virtues. (1997, p. 314)

Instead, Rousseau settles on fortitude:

Indeed, fortitude is the true foundation of Heroism; it is the source or the supplement of the virtues that compose it, and it is what renders it fit for great things. Combine any way you please the qualities that can contribute to forming a great man, if you do not add fortitude to enliven them, they all grow listless and Heroism vanishes. By contrast, force of soul or fortitude alone necessarily bestows a great many Heroic virtues to anyone endowed with it, and it makes up for all the others. (1997, pp. 314–315)

To be great one need only assume mastery of oneself. Our most formidable enemies are within ourselves; and whoever will have succeeded in fighting and vanquishing them will, in the judgment of the Wise, have done more for glory than if he had conquered the Universe. (1997, p. 315)

In doing so, political scientist Christopher Kelly (1997) argues that Rousseau tackles a longstanding tension in the philosophy of heroism, that "our admiration of heroes suggests that they must have some sort of moral excellence or virtue, but when we consider the range of people who are called heroes it is not clear that they share any particular virtue" (1997, p. 350). We can think of good and virtuous people who are not considered heroes, and people considered heroes who are not necessarily good and virtuous.

Kelly observes in Rousseau's treatment "the political superiority of heroes" (1997, p. 350). This refers to the beginning of Rousseau's essay in which he compares the hero to the wise man, arguing that although the wise man is more virtuous, and given the choice one would always be the wise man rather than the hero, "his lessons will not ever correct either the Great who despise them, or the People which does not understand them" (Rousseau, 1997, p. 306). If the hero is an inspiring populist even if imperfect in virtue, the philosopher is better in virtue but can neither inspire nor convince. However, this very populism makes heroism dangerous too. "Part of what is distinctive about heroism", Kelly argues, "is that most people regard it with virtually unmixed admiration" (1997, p. 354). When heroism does not *require* virtue or public good, this has the potential for disaster: an unvirtuous person against the public good but who nonetheless receives widespread admiration as a hero due to the fortitude of their soul.

Rousseau's heroism then is vague in its ontology, as he seems more interested in its consequences for society. Although he begins by saying that "the hero is the work of nature, fortune, and himself" (1997, p. 305), Rousseau says little more about where exactly this vital "strength of soul or fortitude" (1997, p. 315) comes from, or how it can be developed (if at all). He implies that it can be worked on to some degree:

Someone who might be neither courageous, nor just, nor wise, nor moderate by inclination, will yet be so by reason, as soon as having overcome his passions and vanquished his prejudices he senses how much it redounds to his advantage to be so; as soon as he is convinced that he can realize his own happiness only by working for that of others. (1997, pp. 315–316)

Nonetheless, Rousseau's heroism is a deeply individual thing. Introspective, in fact, as it cannot be identified by any outward-facing deed or surface-level attribute. As such, Rousseau's hero can become tautological: we can spot the heroic strength of soul by the admiration of that person in society, admiration which is earned by their strength of soul.

## Jung and Campbell

Jung's archetypal understanding of myth configures heroes as a function of myth:

Over and over again one hears a tale describing a hero's miraculous but humble birth, his early proof of superhuman strength, his rapid rise to prominence or power, his triumphant struggle with the forces of evil, his fallibility to the sin of pride (*hybris*), and his fall through betrayal or a 'heroic' sacrifice that ends in his death. ... These godlike figures are in fact symbolic representatives of the whole psyche, the larger and more comprehensive identity that supplies the strength that the personal ego lacks. (1964/1968, p. 101)

Jung goes on to argue that the hero's "special role suggests that the essential function of the heroic myth is the development of the individual's ... awareness of his own strengths and weaknesses" (1964/1968, p. 101). So, for Jung, the hero of myth is an archetypal figure whose story is used in the development of our psyche. He touches also on a number of elements in

common with other theorists of heroism, in particular self-sacrifice, extraordinary deeds, and a totemic opponent.

Campbell develops Jung's thinking on heroes—and myth in general, as discussed previously. Campbell's influence in both academic works on myth and heroism and in public discourse is undeniable. His monomyth is alternatively named the Hero's Journey: for him, the hero is central, indispensable, definitional to the myth. Campbell's hero is broadly Rousseauian, characterised by mastery over the self: the "hero is the man of self-achieved submission" (1949/2008, p. 11). One is a hero only when one rises to difficult circumstances at some personal, self-inflicted cost. Campbell continues:

The hero, therefore, is the man or woman who has been able to battle past his personal and local historical limitations to the generally valid, normally human forms. Such a one's visions, ideas, inspirations come pristine from the primary springs of human life and thought. Hence they are eloquent, not of the present, disintegrating society and psyche, but of the unquenched source through which society is reborn. The hero has died as a modern man; but as eternal man—perfected unspecific, universal man—he has been reborn.  
(1949/2008, pp. 14–15)

Despite the rightly fierce criticism of the monomyth that I outline in '2 What is Myth?', and despite his probably intentionally epic, mythic linguistic tone not lending itself to a clear, rigorous and neutral treatment of the subject, Campbell's hero here provides a useful kernel for considering heroism as mythologisation. Though the hero's corporeal existence is finite and bound, the *hero* is their person and deeds decoupled from corporeality. The hero—as opposed to the person—becomes decontextualised and unmoored from their contingencies. They become pure symbolism, not a complex human life lived. Unlike Plato and Rousseau, Campbell has little interest in heroes as role-models for real life. To him, they are a uniquely powerful, privileged element of storytelling and myth-making. As such, Campbell's perspective complements those of the earlier thinkers. Where Plato seeks the hero most worthy of imitation and Rousseau cautions against the populist potential of hero-worship, Campbell takes both for granted and studies the poetics at work in propagating the heroic principle.

Campbell's hero is one of leaving personhood and ascending to a divinity of some kind. At the end of the journey, the hero is "master of the two worlds" (1949/2008, p. 196), being still present in the world but having experienced a death of some kind, a cutting off from the world and from society. Campbell describes this as a "state of anonymous presence" (1949/2008, p. 205): anonymous because they are no longer really a person; present because as a result of that self-annihilation they embody some higher, eternal truth. For these reasons, the Hero's Journey is a fundamentally spiritual one, and so heroism itself is fundamentally spiritual.

Since I look at *hero* as a discursive label, Campbell's depiction of what constitutes a hero is far too limited. Campbell's hero must have gone on a Hero's Journey, yet many of those discursively identified as heroes have not. The religious or spiritual foundation of Campbell's hero is also limiting. However, what Campbell does touch on that is interesting is this separation of hero and person. The mythologisation of an individual into a hero does in some sense create

a *separate* figure. Perhaps one of the reasons why it can be a very odd experience to meet one's heroes is because those two figures clash. The hero is the abstract *idea* of an idealised person naturalised by being attached to a living, corporeal person. This is not how Campbell would formulate it, but his splitting of the hero and the person is a useful concept for heroism as mythologisation.

## In psychology and sociology

In the modern context, cultural mythologies often revolve around, are informed by or are defined in relation to what is often called *scientism* (see for example: de Ridder et al., 2018; Robinson & Williams, 2014; Sorell, 1991/1994; Stenmark, 1997; Voegelin, 1948). Midgley calls this the “omnicompetence of science” (2004/2011, p. 19) which in public discourse operates akin to older generalising myths of explaining the world. This myth positions the scientific method as the most accurate, truthful and reliable way of acquiring knowledge. A scientific answer on a subject is always treated as the last word—at least until a better scientific answer supplants it—over any conclusions reached by humanistic methods for example.<sup>19</sup>

In this context, modern conceptions of heroism have also taken a scientific turn, with attempts made to empiricise and quantify heroism. In their literature review, Zeno E. Franco et al. remark that, at least in the context of psychology, “very little theoretical or data-driven inquiry into heroism occurred in the last century, despite an almost overwhelming interest in the psychology of evil”, but that there is now “a renaissance of interest in heroes and heroism” (2018, p. 2).

Franco et al. provide a brief overview of historical understandings of heroism. Like me, they begin with the *Iliad* and Achilles, who “demonstrates the ways in which the exemplary battlefield presents a challenge to his commanders while also highlighting the *pathos* of a young man who understood his own mortality and could personally identify with his enemies” (2018, p. 3). They argue that the example of Achilles “yielded the earliest scholarship on heroes and heroism” through Socrates and Plato (2018, p. 3), who, as discussed, raised the notion of the philosopher-hero as an alternative. From there, Franco et al. turn to Rousseau and David Hume, observing the strength of soul of Rousseau’s hero alongside the dangers of heroism uncoupled from specific virtues. This is contrasted with the hero worship advocated by Carlyle as duty (2018, p. 4). Finally, they raise Sigmund Freud’s treatment of the leaders of early human groups.

Next, Franco et al. turn to 21<sup>st</sup> century heroism research, claiming that “heroism science gained momentum around the turn of this century” (2018, p. 4). Note the use of the word

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<sup>19</sup> In this way, the progression of theories of heroism I have outlined seem to follow Michel Foucault’s orders of discourse, the notion that “in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures” (1971, p. 8). Different orders of discourse dominate in different periods, whereby (broadly speaking) the West has moved from “the age of the Sophists” in which “ritual discourse, charged with power and peril, gradually arranged itself into a disjunction between true and false discourse”, to “the turn of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries and the age which … saw the emergence of an observational, affirmative science”, and then to “the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the great founding acts of modern science, as well as the formation of industrial society and the accompanying positivist ideology” (1971, p. 25).

‘science’ here; they go on to say that “the notion that heroism is a topic worthy of scientific enquiry was reinforced in both public and academic spheres with the publication of book [sic], *The Lucifer Effect* (Zimbardo, 2007)” (2018, p. 4). Zimbardo’s book is important, they argue, because he “reminds us that heroism represents what is right with human nature” and can help us resist evil (2018, p. 5). This represents the main thrust of these empirical approaches to heroism: what do we see as heroic, and how is heroism socially or psychologically useful to us?

Franco and Zimbardo together in an earlier article focus on everyday heroism in ‘The Banality of Heroism’ (2006). In contrast to Carlyle’s thesis, Franco and Zimbardo claim:

By conceiving of heroism as a universal attribute of human nature, not as a rare feature of the few “heroic elect,” heroism becomes something that seems in the range of possibilities for every person, perhaps inspiring more of us to answer that call. (2006)

In other words, the hero is not already intrinsic, sent from above, but is contingent on circumstance, and may or may not appear in any of us. This appears to be an almost conscious remythologisation of the Carlyle model. ‘Almost conscious’ not in the sense that they believe that what they are doing is mythologisation, but rather in that they appear to arrive at their conception of the hero by beginning from what in their view would be a socially useful kind of heroism. It is more *useful* to have heroes to whom one can reasonably aspire, and therefore we *should* conceive of heroism in this way. (This in a way goes full circle back to Plato.) This notion that ‘everybody can be a hero’ is a myth—not in the sense that it is necessarily incorrect, but in that what it means to be a ‘hero’ is already highly mythologised, and so the banality of heroism is better described as a reframing of that hero-myth. The hero is now not only divinely ordained or lineaged, or intrinsically heroic, but is something we can aspire to. Indeed, the intent of Franco and Zimbardo’s article is latent in the final sentence of the above quotation: the reframing of the myth of the hero to be accessible to everyone will hopefully in itself foster that behaviour. If we believe we *can* be heroes, we sometimes will. If we believe we can’t be, we won’t try. Franco and Zimbardo effectively reunite Plato’s and Rousseau’s idea of the necessity of inspirational role-models with the narrative dimension foregrounded by Campbell.<sup>20</sup>

Franco et al.’s review of the various definitions within psychology and sociology of heroism reveal most importantly the hero’s taking on of personal risk or threat in the service of

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<sup>20</sup> The everyday hero is a popular setup in many of the stories we tell. Frodo in *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1955/2007) exhibits no heroic ambition nor special power—indeed, his lack of those two things is precisely what makes him one of the very few characters able to take on the quest, and a prime example of Campbell’s notion that true heroes reject the call. However, the pull towards the intrinsic hero, the ‘chosen one’, or the hero-by-bloodline, is powerful and even often supersedes in stories that initially tease a more ‘everyday’ hero. The development of Rey in the Star Wars sequel trilogy is an example of this. Presented as a hero who arises from nothing and nowhere in particular, Rey is revealed in the final film, *Rise of the Skywalker* (Abrams, 2019), to be Emperor Palpatine’s granddaughter, reinforcing that the revered role of Jedi is, in fact, *not* attainable by the ordinary person, but rather is contingent on intrinsic qualities and lineage.

a principle, the defence of which has broader social benefits (2018, p. 6). Heroes must either materially sacrifice something or risk a grave sacrifice, whether that be physical harm (e.g., firefighters, Týr), or the loss of an otherwise stable and pleasant life (e.g., Frodo, Thunberg), for example. This corroborates a commonly held view in philosophical fields. For example, Hallie Liberto and Fred Harrington, in their discussion of evil, argue that heroism is both:

- (a) performed for the sake of others
  - (b) performed at some cost or risk to the agent
- (2016, p. 1595)

For Liberto and Harrington (2016, p. 1595) this is qualitatively the same as altruism, but that we might think of heroism as simply quantitatively more extreme, i.e., the “sake of others” is a greater cause, or the “cost or risk to the agent” is greater. This, of course, still depends on one’s perspective. To most academics, Alexandra Elbakyan is a hero by these criteria, having put herself at risk for the sake of facilitating the free distribution of primarily publicly funded research. But, according Elsevier’s lawyers, her work has caused “irreparable injury to Elsevier, its customers and the public” (Schiermeier, 2017), so really who’s to say?

Researchers in this field have also conducted studies aiming to discover what, if any, are the traits we most strongly associate with heroism. This is then a descriptive approach that seeks to establish how heroism is already thought of, rather than trying to establish from first principles what it is or should be. Asking 75 college students, Scott T. Allison and George R. Goethals established the “great eight traits”, presented along with closely related terms:

- Smart: intelligent, smart, wise
  - Strong: strong, leader, dominating, courageous, gallant
  - Selfless: moral, honest, selfless, humble, altruistic
  - Caring: compassionate, empathetic, caring, kind
  - Charismatic: eloquent, charismatic, dedicated, passionate
  - Resilient: determined, persevering, resilient, accomplished
  - Reliable: loyal, true, reliable
  - Inspiring: admirable, amazing, great, inspirational
- (2011, p. 62)

Franco et al. note that later, more rigorous studies have produced comparable results (such as Kinsella et al., 2015). In truth, though, the Great Eight traits seem more like a list of traits seen as desirable in general. I can think of many people in my life who embody a number of these traits who I wouldn’t say are ‘heroic’ for that reason. These may be traits that, on average, people’s heroes have, but none of which specifically are *required* for heroism (going back to Rousseau’s argument). For the hero to emerge, it would seem necessary to add circumstances that need to be risen to and an element of material or likely harm in rising to that occasion.

Still, such descriptive studies are useful in understanding how heroism is thought of in society, regardless of what understanding of heroism is used. Most broadly, we can see that heroes in some way embody the ideals of our society. Just as the mythologies of monstrosity demonstrate that which we abhor and abject, as I will show later, mythologies of heroism

are used to naturalise and crystallise that which we revere and aspire to, as well as providing the framework for attaining it, such as by lineage or as the everyday hero rising to the circumstance.

## Heavy heroes

However, the changing thoughts on heroism may also have as much to do with medial contingencies. I discuss this briefly in the earlier section ‘Medium specificity’, but Ong’s ideas are worth exploring in a little more depth and with a greater focus on heroism. Ong’s arguments remind us to also question the very notion of the *hero* as a constant, universal figure.

The heroic and marvelous had served a specific function in organizing knowledge in an oral world. With the control of information and memory brought about by writing and, more intensely, by print, you do not need a hero in the old sense to mobilize knowledge in story form. The situation has nothing to do with a putative ‘loss of ideals’. (1982/2002, p. 69)

He describes the notion of the *heavy hero*, arguing that ‘heavy’ characters—“persons whose deeds are monumental, memorable and commonly public” (1982/2002, p. 68)—first and foremost serve a mnemonic purpose. Before writing stories down became possible and widespread, they had to be recited orally from memory. In a Darwinian way, we might then expect only the most memorable stories to survive and thrive in oral tradition. Heavy heroes “tend to be type figures: wise Nestor, furious Achilles, clever Odysseus, omnicompetent Mwindo” (1982/2002, p. 68). Larger-than-life figures with one or two extraordinary traits, rather than complex, nuanced characters whose intricacies would simply be hard to remember and lost over many retellings.

There are two things to take from this point. The first is that how heroism is constructed is at least influenced by (if not founded in) the medium. We should consider carefully how digital games as a medium may shape, constrict, guide or allow heroism. The second point runs somewhat counter to that. Even if certain facets or models of heroism were originally contingent, that does not mean that those aspects automatically disappear when those contingencies are no longer a factor (the need to memorise stories, for instance). The *Odyssey* is now primarily read in written form rather than orally and Odysseus remains a compelling hero. Things which were at some point the invention of necessity are often carried forward even when the necessity is no longer there. Andrew Burn and Gareth Schott make this point when considering Cloud from *Final Fantasy VII* (Square, 1997) as a heavy hero:

The argument to be made here is not that games, in some simple way, are a continuation of the oral tradition, but rather that its residues, in terms both of narrative and character types, and of performative, improvisatory rhetorics, might appear in games as what Ong describes as the ‘secondary orality’ of high-technology societies—an evolution of the oral mindset in ways dependent on literate and technologically mediated culture. (2004, p. 218)

In a similar way, Burn and Schott argue, some of these principles of oral tradition become carried forward also in ways that would be fundamentally not possible in oral tradition itself,

such as visual design and the affordances of a playable figure within a game system (2004, pp. 218–219). So, both need to be taken into account: the specific contingencies of the medium being examined, as well as the medium-agnostic principles that are carried forward.

## 5.2 Avatars and playable figures

Let us then look more closely at some of the specific contingencies of digital games, and in particular one which seems most associated with the hero: the avatar. It is telling that one of the most common terms for the figure(s) controlled by the player in digital games is ‘avatar’, both in scholarly work but even more so in colloquial discourse. In the gaming context, ‘avatar’ was first used by game developer Richard Garriott, who found the Hindu term *avatar*, referring to the earthly incarnation of a god, to be a good metaphor for the experience of being a player who inhabits with their “spirit being” an entity within the gameworld (Garriott, 2010).

The issues with using this term in the gaming context have been raised by Lars de Wildt et al. (2020), but it seems the ship has sailed on that front as the term nonetheless enjoys pervasive usage at least in popular discourse, even if less so now in academic game studies. In addition to the alluring yet problematic associations of mysticism and leisurely otherness that de Wildt et al. (2020) argue accompany the term, I also see in ‘avatar’ a connection to the power, exceptionalism and mythicity of the hero. While the playable figure is not necessarily the hero, they very often are, and so the term ‘avatar’—already laden by its religious background with more mythicity than other proposed terms like *player-character*, *playable figure* and *playable character*—primes this way of thinking of the entity controlled by the player in the game: not as a ‘real’ individual, but as a fundamentally mythical being, a hero.

That mythical quality helps explain the term’s adoption and persistence, but it is not justification to continue using it, even for my purposes writing about myth. Scholars have put forward many alternative terms, each with rich theoretical reasoning. Daniel Vella proposes “playable figure” as a way of merging both the notions of avatar and character (2015a, p. 10). This distinction follows from Rune Klevjer’s, that ‘avatar’ refers more to the “vehicle through which the player is given some kind of embodied agency and presence within the gameworld”, while character is less instrumental and refers to a specific persona (2012, p. 17). *Playable figure* intends to encapsulate both the instrumental reality of the entity within the gameworld whom the player controls, and the capacity for that entity *also* having a character or persona in some way. That these are distinct is evidenced when they clash: a very simple example would be when the character in a cutscene tells someone they will help them, and then the player controls the playable figure to immediately kill that person when they regain control. Or when we control, for the purposes of a game, a character who lives a rich transmedial life outside of and beyond that game (see Blom, 2020, pp. 61–77), like Spider-Man.

This distinction has interesting implications for thinking through where heroism sits in this picture. Is heroism a property of the character? When I beat a game, do I consider myself a hero, or am I distinct from the character who I do consider a hero, even if their actions were ones that I, in some sense, performed? Does this vary depending on game, in which

case, on what does it depend? Perhaps how ‘blank slate’ a character is impacts this—the Dragonborn versus Nathan Drake, for example. Locating the mythologies of heroism within games is wound up in the construction of the playable figure.

## 5.3 What makes a hero?

With all that said, what is it that I mean by *hero* in this project? I do not pin myself to any one understanding of heroism, because here my focus is on mythologisation as a process, rather than on any individual product of that process. The perspectives on heroes discussed diverge significantly in their views and aims, and provide rather examples of the mythologisation of heroism than a definition of it. To that end, my minimal definition of *hero* is more about a particular convergence of many mythologisations. That is, I focus here on the hero as *the mythologisation of an individual into an aspirational, idealised, elevated figure*.

There are two key parts to this. The first is that the hero is a *mythologised individual*: a person who stands for more than their own contingent, corporeal personhood and who is a part or nexus of more abstract, decontextualised properties. Second is that this mythologisation is in some way *positive*: the hero is admirable, aspirational or idealised (even if flawed). It is the positive mythologisation of an individual.

## 5.4 Hero-types

As discussed, mythologies develop in cycles and can be reconfigured into different hierarchies. Some of these mythologies are defined or informed by medial contingencies, while other aspects transcend a particular medium and circulate across media and through time. In analysing how the games I examine arrange these mythological constellations of heroes and heroism, it can be helpful to align the game’s model of heroism with some of the broader constructions that have permeated over a long time. For brevity, I call these *hero-types*, each describing a prominent heroic ontology. That is, a hero-type describes a common convergence of ways in which a person is mythologized as a hero. *Why* are they considered heroes? *What purpose or function* does their mythologisation of heroes serve—why is it important to crystallise and idealise *this* particular construction of heroism? Here, I identify a few of these which are particularly relevant to the games I analyse, by drawing on recent studies of heroic discourse. This is not meant to be a comprehensive typology of heroisms. Instead, these heuristic example types help us to see how these games are connected to broader culture and to tradition through the ways in which they use and appropriate mythologies of heroism.

### The hero-victim

As I have shown, many understandings of heroism construe self-sacrifice and risk as a constitutive part of being a hero. In this sense, all heroes would be victims to some degree. However, the type I identify here as the *hero-victim* positions victimhood as central to its construction and, crucially, as a *pretext* to heroism. *Hero-victim* is a term I borrow and adapt from media scholar Martin Barker (2011), who outlines the *hero-victim* with regards to the heroes of Iraq War films. However, I argue that it applies more broadly to war narratives,

*particularly* since World War One. In the last few facets of his nine-part description of “an American ‘Iraq war experience’” (2011, p. 42), Barker outlines the three components for how these film’s soldier protagonists become moral heroes:

First, (7) soldiers are shown bonding with each other, giving this as their first loyalty. Officers, politicians, civilians all fail them. They are effectively alone, unwanted, sacrificial victims. They can therefore (8) be presented as struggling to hold on to values in the face of all that happens around them. And in extremis (9) special figures—perhaps representatives of minorities of one kind or another—will stand out, who can embody perfectly a new kind of soldier: the hero-victim. (2011, p. 43)

Most straightforwardly, the *hero-victim* here is the hero who arises out of the hell of war. In most cases, the construction of the *hero-victim* begins by establishing the utter tragedy of the situation. The soldier of war is often depicted as:

- Innocent with regards to the political context of the war. The soldier is not personally responsible for being there, nor for justifying the military action.
- Stripped from their ordinary life (particularly in cases of conscription).
- Having to endure the awful circumstances of the battlefield, such as the trenches of WWI or the heat of Iraq.

Philosopher Angela Hobbs (2018) argues that this depiction that I call here the *hero-victim* marks a break from classical notions of heroism and that it stems in particular from World War One. Emblematic of this shift, Hobbs observes, is the difference between two of Wilfred Owen’s poems: ‘The Ballad of Purchase-Money’, written in 1914 just after the outbreak of the war, and ‘Dulce et Decorum Est’, written in 1917 after suffering from shell-shock and only published posthumously. A stanza in the former poem reads:

O meet it is and passing sweet  
 To live in peace with others  
 But sweeter still and far more meet  
 To die in war for brothers.  
 (Owen, 1914, as cited in Hobbs, 2018, p. 376)

The latter poem famously ends with a vivid, furious rejection of this nobility of war:

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace  
 Behind the wagon that we flung him in,  
 And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,  
 His hanging face, like a devil’s sick of sin;  
 If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood  
 Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,  
 Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud  
 Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—  
 My friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
 To children ardent for some desperate glory,

The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est  
Pro patria mori.  
(Owen, 1917, as cited in Hobbs, 2018, pp. 376–377)

The Latin phrase at the end of the poem comes from the Roman poet Horace (*Odes* 3.2), and represents a classical, perhaps Homeric view of heroism that the greatest honour is to die on the battlefield for one's country. (The phrase is usually translated as 'it is sweet and fitting to die for the homeland'.) Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum Est' does not cast any *hero*-victim, however: only a *victim*. There is no *rising from* the muck and horror, only the muck and horror. Like Owen writes in 'Anthem for Doomed Youth', another of his poems written around the same time, these are young men who simply "die as cattle" (1920, l. 1). From where does the heroism emerge?

Hobbs argues that this vehement rejection of past heroisms is due to "the squalid realities of mechanized twentieth-century combat" (2018, p. 377)—no longer shining armour and swords, but trenches, artillery and guns—combined with the sheer number of people involved. But the desire for heroes seems resilient; Owen's striking poetry did not succeed in ending heroism. Hobbs argues for the heroism in Owen and in the legacy of World War One in two ways. The first is in the formation of a heroic victim:

The soldier trudging on through filth, gas, noise and brutal deaths despite appalling odds; the patient minds of the girls who scatter tender thoughts on their dead sweethearts like flowers, pulling down the blinds each slow dusk, day after day. The conditions of WWI—both for those fighting it and for those left at home to wait and grieve—meant that even being able to perform one's daily duties might be thought to take on a heroic quality. (2018, p. 390)

The second is in remembering and acknowledging that heroism:

If being a hero involves in part being viewed and treated as a hero, as I suggested above, then to function as heroes in their society the unnamed and unknown do at the very least need some kind of vehicle by means of which their society can commemorate them. Such vehicles exist: the various tombs of the Unknown Soldier around the world, for example, serve just such a function. I submit that, whatever his intentions, the poems of Owen and in particular 'Dulce et Decorum Est' can serve as another such vehicle. (2018, p. 390)

While in the classical tradition heroism is done in service of the homeland in the glory of battle, post-Owen heroism, for Hobbs, takes as pretext the tragedy, injustice and horror of battle. The heroic act arises in service of one's immediate comrades, those who suffer also from the injustice and horror around them. This heroism does not have to be Achillean or Herculean feats of impossible strength or prowess but can simply be the ability of someone to, as the now-clichéd British motivational poster from World War Two says, keep calm and carry on with normal duties in the face of such abhorrence.

The ordinariness of this heroism, the fact that it can come from anyone, and combined with the context of mechanised warfare and millions of deaths, means that anonymity often

also becomes a part of this. This is exemplified in the many monuments around the world to unknown soldiers who died, too many to number and too ordinary to chronicle each. As I write in a later section, this anonymity can become a heroic mythology of its own, the *unsung hero*, that intertwines with this and other hero-types. The soldier's at least partial anonymity and lack of due praise for their actions becomes a core part of their heroism.

Let's begin putting Frog's mythic discourse analysis markup into practice. This hero-type could be rendered as four key motifs:

- A. INNOCENT.SOLDIER IS.ORDERED TO:WARZONE
- B. INNOCENT.SOLDIER DOES.DUTY IN:HELLISH.CIRCUMSTANCES
- C1. INNOCENT.SOLDIER RISKS SELF
- C2. INNOCENT.SOLDIER SAVES COMRADES~INNOCENTS

That the soldier is innocent is given as pretext, and the warzone to which they are sent is far from home, isolated and hellish, or is their own home made inhospitable by the inhuman death and destruction of an invasion. In this way, the *hero-victim*'s main departure from many classical notions of heroism is a lack of agency. In most traditional understandings of heroism, the hero chooses to rise to the occasion and/or has some innate power that makes them uniquely capable of doing so. The *hero-victim*, on the other hand, did not choose to be in the situation they are in—or at least vastly underestimated it (as in WWI, where many soldiers joined for glory and faced instead hellish circumstances, demonstrated by the progression of Owen's poetry). This has the primary function of absolving the hero of responsibility for the broader situation. The ordinary soldier of WWI (or WWII, or the Vietnam or Iraq wars, etc.) is not responsible for the war nor the hell it became. Rather than this diminishing their heroism, it makes their choice to perform their duty in spite of the circumstances and the unfairness of their situation all the more admirable in the heroic construction. There is the sense that they did not *owe* it to anyone to go above and beyond, and so their heroic actions also become magnanimous.

## The hero-sceptic

Another departure from the earnest, faithful and straightforward models of classical heroism is the rise of scepticism as a core of heroism. This does not refer to heroes who happen to be sceptical, but those whose scepticism is the engine of their heroism. Robert Langdon in Dan Brown's popular series of novels (2000–2017) is not a particularly good fighter, but his intellectual capabilities combined with his willingness to be sceptical—particularly towards established religious institutions and doctrine—is what makes him a hero. This draws somewhat from the hero-philosopher that Plato proposes, but emerges at least in the modern conception from Enlightenment thinking more specifically.

The *hero-sceptic* can be seen as the hero of scientism. It reflects a shift in societal perceptions of who the ultimate arbiters of truth and morals are from the state and religious institutions to the individual self and empirical science. Many traditional heroes are in some way affiliated or aligned with a god or gods. The greatest prize for King Arthur and his knights is the Holy Grail; Heracles is the son of Zeus; Cú Chulainn is the son and/or incarnation of

Lugh. But the heroes of contemporary media tend not to be of this divine paradigm (with fantasy as a prominent exception).

Instead, we more commonly see *hero-sceptics* who are in large part defined by an *independence from* large institutions such as organised religion or the state. Even if they are formally or informally affiliated with one such institution, they are usually depicted as being in some way distant or independent from it nonetheless. Robert Langdon is a senior professor with tenure, for example, which offers him a degree of independence and freedom even from the more innocuous institution of the university. The familiar trope of the cop brought out of retirement for one last case also plays into this: the hero has greater personal independence from the institution of the police because they no longer rely on it for a career or an income. Or, likewise, the ‘rogue cop’, whose disrespect of due process and institutional rules and conventions belies a higher belief in justice, which is typically rewarded in narratives with a more effective investigation. There is also a reason why Sherlock Holmes is a private detective rather than a police detective: it makes him more independent. Such independence reinforces that character’s uniquely unbiased, unclouded perspective on the situation, which allows for the solution to be uncovered. Usually, the solution is inconvenient for one or more of the institutions involved and so can *only* be solved by an outsider. Common examples of this include the perpetrator being another police officer, or the church being a front for some Illuminati-type group, or government corruption that ‘goes all the way to the top’.

The *hero-sceptic* is the hero of scientism. Here, I use ‘scepticism’ in the non-philosophical sense of a willingness to doubt and question claims rather than accepting them based on faith or trust in an authority (see Comesaña & Klein, 2019 for an overview of philosophical scepticism). Within society, a level of ‘healthy scepticism’ is typically seen as positive and useful. In previous ages, scepticism in this way might have been regarded as blasphemous or treasonous, because it implies mistrust in authoritative institutions. (This is a simplification, though, of course.) The scientific method is the preferred tool of the sceptic: the verifiable, replicable, transparent search for answers that does not rely on faith or authority. The championing of empiricism and the scientific method is such that science today is positioned as the ultimate, ideal truth. The best form of knowledge. Sometimes, the *only* true form of knowledge. This more extreme position constitutes scientism.

Scientism mythologises epistemology, framing as natural that only by the scientific method and empiricism can we truly *know* things. The effect of this more widely is to reduce everything to empirical measurements. Midgley uses the example of 20<sup>th</sup> century behavioural psychology, the “doctrine that psychology, in order to be scientific, must deal only with people’s outward behaviour, ignoring motives and emotions and regarding them, not just as unknowable but as trivial and causally ineffective” (2004/2011, p. 25). Scientism also leads to the quantification of many realms of life—such as grades in schools or gross domestic product (GDP) as a measure of a country’s success—because if something can be quantifiable and operationalizable by the scientific method, then it is ‘more true’ than other measures and approaches. This extends also to a hierarchy *within* the scientific method, whereby quantitative data is perceived as more authoritative than qualitative.

This mythology has begun to be scrutinised in recent years. Notably, the Kingdom of Bhutan adopted in its 2008 constitution the commitment to Gross Domestic *Happiness*

(rather than the dominant measure of gross domestic *product*), with other countries following suit, such as New Zealand in 2019 (Ellsmoor, 2019). While GNH still attempts to quantify ‘happiness’, it is a notably more subjective and human-centred approach than GDP. The global interest attracted by moves such as New Zealand might suggest a more widespread dissatisfaction with the dispassionate quantification of human life.

The *hero-sceptic*, though, is a paragon for scientism. They are the scientist *par excellence*.<sup>21</sup> Their most important tool is their ability to think laterally and critically. They are either independent from institutions that would otherwise bias them, or their painful separation from those institutions as a result becomes part of the heroic self-sacrifice (the scientist who dares tell the truth as is fired from their university, for example). Unlike many previous models of heroism, the *hero-sceptic* is characterised by independence. Religious faith, loyalty to the king and homeland patriotism are not in this mythology construed as virtues. The hero is not the champion of the church, for example. Rather, these institutions are seen ultimately as barriers to the truth. The truth is not represented or captured by any one institution or authority and so unflinching loyalty is a *flaw*. The *hero-sceptic* is a champion instead of individual Cartesian rationalism. True knowledge lies beyond the institutions that control us, and the hero must be brave enough to defy those institutions.

This could be broadly construed in the following way as a mythic discourse theme:

- A1. RATIONAL.PERSON~SCIENTIST IDENTIFIES PROBLEM
  - A2. KNOWLEDGE.AUTHORITY ANSWERS~DENIES PROBLEM
  - A3. RATIONAL.PERSON~SCIENTIST IS.UNSATISFIED WITH:ANSWER~DENIAL
- B1. R.P~S SEEKS TRUTH
  - B2. R.P~S FINDS TRUTH
  - B3. TRUTH IS.INCONVENIENT FOR:K.A
  - OR → B4. TRUTH=K.A CAUSED PROBLEM
- C. K.A OSTRACISES~THREATENS~ATTACKS R.P~S

Presenting the *hero-sceptic* in this form, two things come to the fore. The first is that, unlike the *hero-victim*, the *hero-sceptic* is often not produced by their unwilling circumstances. Sherlock takes on cases often because he is bored, for instance, not because he has to. Rather, the *hero-sceptic*'s risk to self is often a risk taken voluntarily as a result of their dedication to the truth. The second follows from this, that the *hero-sceptic* in a sense produces the crisis or the confrontation. It would be possible for them to simply ignore the issue or to accept the knowledge authority's answer, but instead the *hero-sceptic* forces a confrontation. In this sense, it is more active than the *hero-victim*, which arises out of a heroic *reaction* to circumstances.

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<sup>21</sup> Indeed, we increasingly see heroification of literal scientists. Recent popular films such as *The Imitation Game* (Tyldum, 2014), *The Theory of Everything* (Marsh, 2014), *Interstellar* (Nolan, 2014), *The Martian* (Scott, 2015), *Arrival* (Villeneuve, 2016) and many more centre scientists (mostly but not always in the ‘hard’ sciences) as heroes.

## The preordained hero

Psychological and sociological research on modern heroes posits that heroism can (or *should* be seen as being able to) come from anyone. There is nothing innate in a person that means they can or cannot rise to acts of true heroism, it is simply a matter of sacrificing oneself for some greater good. Most outwardly prevalent now in fantasy works, however, is a different model of heroism in which heroism is an innate, possibly divine property: the *preordained hero*. I term it for brevity, though it could also be the hero of prophecy, the fated hero, the chosen one or the hero of bloodline. Generally speaking, this hero-type entails a necessary but as-yet-unfulfilled heroic role, waiting for the hero to step into it. Most crucially, the hero is therefore *already* a hero, prior to the heroic act. The *preordained hero* is constituted of two main parts or assumptions.

The first is that there is a balance between two opposing forces—often good and evil—particularly when in the context of a prophecy. A prophecy tends to lay out what these two sides are, describe the great threat, and then the equivalent but opposite hero who will face that threat. “The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...” reads Sybill Trelawney’s first prophecy in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* (Rowling, 2003, p. 841). “The signs of a resurrection of Calamity Ganon are clear. And the power to oppose it lies dormant beneath the ground”, says the royal family’s trusted fortune-teller in *Breath of the Wild* (Nintendo EPD, 2017). The first two *Star Wars* trilogies revolve around the prophecy of the Chosen One who would bring balance to the Force, eventually fulfilled as the Sith Lord Darth Vader, formerly Jedi Anakin Skywalker, finally turns from the Dark Side at the climax of *Episode VI – Return of the Jedi* (Marquand, 1983). So the *hero of prophecy* in particular but also often the *preordained hero* in general is constituted as one side of an overarching binary.

The second part or assumption is that the hero is preordained. It is therefore less aspirational in the sense that if one is not already the hero, one cannot hope to *become* the hero. This preordination can manifest in many ways. A god or gods might select an individual and imbue them with heroism. They might cause the hero to be born in the first place. They may themselves appear as the hero in some incarnation. Or some metaphysical force not characterised as a god, such as fate, may decide the hero. Of course, the distinction between metaphysical forces, gods and so on is difficult to make. The point is that heroism in this type is depicted as stemming from a higher source and imbued *into* an individual. The heroism is not attainable by one’s own will and effort. If you were born in Tamriel and are not the Dragonborn, you can forget about defeating Alduin. Doing heroic deeds and being called a hero is therefore *recognition* of the character’s already-heroic being, rather than becoming a hero *by doing* heroic deeds.

Prophecy differs from prediction in that while the latter is derived from an empirical model, however (un)sophisticated, the former is derived from faith. If the ultimate source of the prophecy can be believed, then it is fated to come true. A prediction, on the other hand, is only as good as its model. As Deeanne Westbrook puts it:

Prophecy that predicts the future is inextricably a part of an idea cluster that includes a supernatural author (the Fates, Yahweh, Allah), whose text with its beginning, middle, and end includes all of human history, as well as all

human characters, their acts, and their destinies. As the characters emerge, one by one, they demonstrate if nothing else that they lead their lives as inscribed in the divine texts. Any resistance to one's destiny only proves to be a part of it. (2011, p. 169)

A world governed by fate is similar to a narrative in that it is constative. The characters may not know what words are written on the next page, but those words *are* already written. This reinforces the top-down understanding of heroism. The hero is not one who rises to the occasion, but an individual selected by the supernatural author for an elevated role in the story. Note also here that the existence of prophecy presupposes a supernatural author whose existence is reciprocally proven by the fulfilling of the prophecy.

It is also possible for the prophecy or preordination to be very vague and open-ended. For example, the widespread *sleeping hero* construction formed by something along the lines of, 'this hero will arise/return in a time of great need'.<sup>22</sup> Holger Danske is a prime example, forever asleep under Kronborg in Helsingør until Denmark is in need. Hans Christian Andersen in 1845 is one of the many who have repeated the prophecy that Holger will rise in Denmark's time of peril:

But the most beautiful sight of all is the old castle of Kronenburg, where Holger Danske sits in the deep, dark cellar, into which no one goes. He is clad in iron and steel, and rests his head on his strong arm; his long beard hangs down upon the marble table, into which it has become firmly rooted; he sleeps and dreams, but in his dreams he sees everything that happens in Denmark. On each Christmas-eve an angel comes to him and tells him that all he has dreamed is true, and that he may go to sleep again in peace, as Denmark is not yet in any real danger; but should danger ever come, then Holger Danske will rouse himself, and the table will burst asunder as he draws out his beard. Then he will come forth in his strength, and strike a blow that shall sound in all the countries of the world. (1981, p. 417)

This motif can instead be read metaphorically too. In WWII, Denmark's largest resistance group during the Nazi occupation called themselves Holger Danske. Although no large, bearded statue named Holger appeared in the situation, it is metaphorically argued that Holger did not have to be 'real', but could rather be a heroic spirit who *did* appear in the form of the resistance group.

In games, a prominent version of this is found in the *Legend of Zelda* series (1986–2021). *The Legend of Zelda Encyclopedia* states:

Link is not just one individual; he is the hero reborn to many homes, over the course of many lifetimes, chosen by the goddesses with a singular purpose: to stand up and fight when evil descends upon Hyrule. ... A new version of the hero will arise when Hyrule needs them most to restore balance and

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<sup>22</sup> This has also been termed the *king asleep under the mountain*, or *Kyffhäuser*, in the influential Stith Thompson motif-index (Thompson, 1955).

become legend, only to be reborn again when evil threatens. (Nintendo, 2018, p. 18)

As Westbrook says of prophecy that resistance to it only proves to be a part of it, so too does the hero of need work. If the hero themselves as an individual does not appear, but the crisis was averted, then they actually *did* appear in their heroic spirit. (Perhaps also as self-fulfilling prophecy, whereby the belief in the heroic spirit spurred the sufficient action.) Or if no hero appeared then it was not a sufficiently dire crisis. Perhaps it was one which, in the grand scheme of things, will turn out to be temporary and relatively inconsequential, rather than existential. The hero of need therefore seems more often to be about developing a heroic spirit that represents a particular group (such as a nation).

At minimum, then, for a *preordained hero* there needs simply to be a hero whose heroism was in some way predetermined, whether by deity, destiny or DNA: HERO IS.PREORDAINED BY:SUPERNATURAL ENTITY~BLOODLINE. In the more specific but very prevalent prophecy form, the broad structure can be laid out like this:

- A. SUPERNATURAL.AGENT PROPHESES DEVIL AND HERO
- B. DEVIL EMERGES
- C. HERO EMERGES
- D. HERO SLAYS DEVIL

The emergence of both the great evil or threat (DEVIL, following Frog's usage) and the HERO must have been prophesied prior to their emergence, and that prophecy must then in some manner come true. Often this is a literal *hero of prophecy*, but any preordination can count as 'prophecy' for this purpose. Typically, the DEVIL will emerge before the HERO, allowing for there to be a dramatic period when all hope seems lost. The HERO emerges and must then overcome the DEVIL. Note here a key difference when compared with other hero-types I have discussed: in this structure, they are *already* the HERO. The *hero-sceptic* is rendered as RATIONAL.PERSON~SCIENTIST and the *hero-victim* as INNOCENT.SOLDIER because they are not considered a hero until they have done heroic deeds. In a narrative, we can typically guess correctly that that protagonist will become the hero. It is not a big surprise to us that they act heroically. But in the construction of their heroism, they become a hero through doing heroic acts, whereas the *preordained hero* is already the hero, because they have been preordained as such.

## **The unsung hero**

The *unsung hero* is always in some sense ironic because if we are hearing about them or playing as them, they are no longer 'unsung'. But it can refer to heroes who we perceive to have *until now* been unsung, or heroes who we perceive as having been misconstrued. This can be because their actions were not known or understood until later. Vasily Arkhipov, for example, whose refusal to authorise the deployment of nuclear torpedoes during the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 was not revealed until after his death in 1998. Or it can be because they intentionally stayed anonymous or in the background, not wanting the attention—many consider at least some of the actions of the decentralised hacktivist group Anonymous to be

heroic. In a sense, this also applies to many comic book superheroes, who try to remain pseudonymous. Else it can be because a different lens on a story or historical event reveals different important actors previously ignored due to prejudice or bias. This can be seen in popular articles such as ‘18 Black History Heroes You May Never Have Heard Of’ (Maloney et al., 2021) or ‘7 unsung heroines who changed the course of history’ (Bondy, 2021).

As such, the *unsung hero* is not exclusive of other hero-types, and indeed *presupposes* heroism. In this sense also, the *unsung hero* is a different kind of hero-type—perhaps a meta-type. It is defined not by a particular ontology of heroism, but by the (lack of) *response* to their heroism. Calling other heroes ‘sung’ heroes is redundant, and so the *unsung hero* is by definition a reaction. In this way, this hero-type in particular exposes the discursive nature of heroism, because we can see an internal questioning of the status quo of the hero myth at the same time as lifting someone up as a hero. It both presupposes heroism as something which exists and which can be ‘uncovered’, but also shows it to be a fallible, strategic, rhetorical process. *The unsung hero is a construction that suggests that we now understand or relate to the past differently and causes us to question why that is.* In the example I raised of unsung women heroes of history, singing their praises now tells us that (a) in the past we did not value their contribution, with the implication that this is due to their being a woman, and (b) we *do now* value their contribution, the implication being that we now value or intend to value the heroism of women today. In other cases, the *unsung hero* can be more knowledge-oriented, often scientifically. Advances in archaeology (for instance) or the discovery of new historical sources shed light on someone whose existence we were not previously even aware of, but whose acts we now see as heroic. This latter example as a mythic construction is often used in alternate history fictions. In the *Assassin’s Creed* series, for example, the protagonists of the series are never historical figures themselves, but are shown to interact with many historical figures and to, in fact, be at the very centre of the events of the time. The implication in alternate history is that the ability for us to have missed such an important hero leverages a gap of knowledge into which other unhistorical elements can be inserted. If we missed *that much*, then what else might we have missed?!

That a hero becomes an *unsung hero* can also be a constituent part of their heroism as its own form of self-sacrifice. In some cases, it is a sacrifice in itself that the hero will be forgotten, remain anonymous, or have someone else take credit. Or even that instead of being recognised as a hero they are vilified, with no one truly understanding their acts of heroism. Knight Artorias the Abysswalker in *Dark Souls: Artorias of the Abyss* (FromSoftware, 2012) is faced as an abyss-corrupted boss who sacrificed himself to save his wolf companion, Sif. The Chosen Undead (the playable figure) travels back in time, relieves Oolacile of its corruption and bests Artorias. But their saving of Oolacile is later attributed to Artorias instead, who is believed to have perished in the process rather than having become corrupted. In *The Dark Knight* (Nolan, 2008), Batman valorises Harvey Dent and takes the blame for his death, becoming vilified as a result. In *Rogue One* (Edwards, 2016), we also see a kind of rehistori-cising even within the *Star Wars* universe, where the previously unsung heroism of the unknown person who stole the Death Star schematics that were central in *A New Hope* (Lucas, 1977) is now properly recognised. In these cases, becoming unsung becomes a fundamental part of their heroic construction (the self-sacrificial risk or consequence becomes specified).

The *unsung hero* therefore differs somewhat in kind from the previous types. It can be either a later mode of reception of heroism or a property of heroism internal to a hero-type. Rendered as a partial, it is:

RISK~CONSEQUENCE=HERO IS.FORGOTTEN~MISATTRIBUTED~VILIFIED

As a meta-hero-type, it could be construed as the motif:

FORGOTTEN~MISATTRIBUTED~VILIFIED.PERSON IS.RECOGNISED AS:HERO

Note that in the partial, we begin with the hero and see that their consequence is to essentially no longer be recognised as a hero. In the meta-type, we begin with a non-hero (whether an unknown, ordinary person to a perceived villain) and reconstruct them as a hero.

With these types laid out to help with the analyses, I now turn to the game examples, beginning with the *Call of Duty* series.

## 5.5 Call of Duty

Let's begin with what should be a straightforward example: the *Call of Duty* series (Infinity Ward, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2013, 2016, 2019; Infinity Ward & Sledgehammer Games, 2011; Sledgehammer Games, 2014, 2017, 2021; Treyarch, 2006, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2015, 2018; Treyarch & Raven Software, 2020). *Call of Duty* is a first-person shooter series. The first three games all focus on the Second World War, before *Modern Warfare* took the series to a fictionalised Middle East. Since then, the series has returned to both of those settings but has additionally depicted the Cold War, and fictional near- and far-future conflicts.

The series has three main 'subseries' consisting of multiple games within the same setting or overarching story arc. There are six games set in WWII: *Call of Duty*, 2, 3, *World at War*, *WWII* and *Vanguard* (Infinity Ward, 2003, 2005; Treyarch, 2006, 2008; Sledgehammer Games, 2017, 2021). Players control Allied troops, usually low-ranked conscripts in the US, British and Soviet forces, in the fight against the Axis powers across various theatres.

The *Modern Warfare* series focuses on two parallel conflicts: one in a fictionalised Middle East, and another with a fictional Russian party and terrorist organisation called the Ultra-nationalists. The series primarily consists of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare*, *Modern Warfare 2* and *Modern Warfare 3* (Infinity Ward, 2007, 2009; Infinity Ward & Sledgehammer Games, 2011). Here, the player controls various soldiers, usually elite, in the US and British special forces, combatting the Ultranationalists and fighting to liberate the unnamed Middle Eastern country. The more recent *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* and its sequel *Modern Warfare II* (Infinity Ward, 2019, 2022) reboot the series and so are separate from the rest of the subseries, set instead within the *Black Ops* storyworld.<sup>23</sup>

The *Black Ops* subseries begins with the WWII game *World at War* and continues into the Cold War and beyond into a speculative near-future. *Black Ops* consists of *World at War*, *Black Ops, II, III, 4*, and *Cold War* (Treyarch, 2008, 2010, 2012, 2015, 2018; Treyarch & Raven Software, 2020), although 4 does not feature a singleplayer campaign, which is what I focus on in this chapter. In *Black Ops*, the player controls covert CIA operatives taking part in clandestine operations as part of the Cold War (and beyond into the near future).

Three games fall outside these subseries: *Call of Duty: Ghosts*, *Advanced Warfare* and *Infinite Warfare* (Infinity Ward, 2013, 2016; Sledgehammer Games, 2014). *Ghosts* is set in the near future following nuclear devastation in the Middle East. Afterwards, an alliance of South American nations begins conquering the Americas. The player fights as part of a US clandestine special forces unit called Ghosts. *Advanced Warfare* is set in 2054 and begins with a North Korean invasion of Seoul. The protagonist subsequently becomes involved with the mercenary group Atlas in a fight against global anti-Western terrorist organisation, the KVA. *Infinite Warfare* is set in 2187. Earth has little natural resources left following

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<sup>23</sup> The *Call of Duty* series publishes a new game yearly, and so I have already had to update this section a number of times over the duration of the project. *Call of Duty Vanguard* (Sledgehammer Games, 2021) is the most recent game I take into consideration. The next mainline game, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II* (Infinity Ward, 2022), was released on 28 October 2022, days before submitting this dissertation, and so is not included here.

‘overpopulation’ and now relies on mining on other planets, moons and asteroids. On Mars, a totalitarian government is established and begins to wage war on Earth’s United Nations Space Alliance (UNSA).

*Call of Duty* continues a longstanding tradition of glorifying the (often American) war hero. As film and digital media scholar Debra Ramsay puts it in relation to World War Two:

In the last two decades, the citizen soldier has come to epitomize an entire generation, identified as the “Greatest Generation” because of its involvement in a conflict broadly characterized as a “Good War.” From the books of journalist Tom Brokaw, who popularized the term “Greatest Generation,” to those of historian Stephen Ambrose, through films such as *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998) ... the United States’ popular narrative of World War II situates the GI as both primary protagonist and victim of the conflict. With a few exceptions ... the dominant narrative of the war highlights the nobility of fighting for “the man next to you” and celebrates the masculine bonds of brotherhood forged within the faraway and extreme spaces of the battlefield. (2015b, pp. 94–95)

This plays into the *hero-victim* construction, whereby soldiers in the way are construed as victims of the situation, innocent of its political impetus, and who are heroes for maintaining a basic humanity.

In particular, because *Call of Duty* spans from World War Two to present-day and future conflicts, it is interesting to see the similarities and differences. I will explore some of these individually below, but I want to begin with this idea that the *hero-victim* is politically innocent. Notice that in the *Call of Duty* series, only World War Two is depicted concretely and with (an attempt at) historical accuracy and fidelity. It is easy to position an American soldier as a hero in World War Two because of the almost-total consensus on the Nazis’ overwhelming evil. The cause is unambiguously just and righteous. This is more difficult to do with the 2003 invasion of Iraq, for example. Support for this cause before the war (2001–2002) hovered between 50–60%, only briefly going higher in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks (Saad, 2002). 50–60% support is notably high support for the invasion of a sovereign nation, but it is not truly a consensus. Since the mid-2000s, opposition to the invasion became a majority (albeit slim at times) and that has not changed since (Baxter Oliphant, 2018). Unlike World War Two then, painting the invasion as fundamentally just is always at the very least provocative. This could explain why in *Call of Duty*, World War Two is always allowed to be a concrete setting, with historical events and people, while the games set in modern wars are fictionalised. The first of these games in the *Modern Warfare* subseries, *Call of Duty 4* (Infinity Ward, 2007) is largely set in an unnamed Middle Eastern country, where a fictional anti-Western, separatist group seizes power in a coup d'état. The parallel plotline features Russian ‘Ultranationalists’. Although Russia is concretised, the group and all its members are fictional. It is within this abstracted context that the *hero-victim* can be developed more easily as apolitical. Either the conflict has to have a consensus surrounding it, or it must be abstracted and fictionalised in order to depoliticise it, allowing focus on the heroism of the ordinary soldier rather than the context for their being there.

This provides the pretext for the *hero-victim*, allowing the focus to turn to the situations of individual soldiers. They are there due to political forces beyond their control and for reasons they may not themselves support. This is compounded by the general misery of war—on an individual level, we can of course sympathise that being far from home and in constant danger is no picnic. As both Ramsay and Barker observe, the focus of heroism turns then not to grand strategic objectives, but to the fraternity of the squad. The heroic act is not about furthering the overall war effort but is instead about rising above the hell of war by maintaining their values and loyalty to the squad under immense pressure, and in ensuring that as many as possible make it out alive, often taking enormous risks to fulfil the well-known US Army credo to ‘leave no man behind’. *Black Ops II* (Treyarch, 2012), for example, opens with the mission ‘Pyrrhic Victory’ in which Alex Mason, the playable figure, is called out of retirement to rescue an old friend captured in Angola. Completion of the mission rewards the player with the trophy ‘Leave No Man Behind’. In other words, Saddam Hussein is not used as the primary villain in the mythic construction of the Iraq war *hero-victim* so much as the fact of war *itself* being the villain. It is a heroic construction that eschews the traditional HERO SLAYS DEVIL, instead having a more inward focus of either maintaining humanity in the face of war, or risking danger to save comrades. Meanwhile, war is treated as a simple fact of life. The *hero-victim* in part works to mythologise the concept of war itself, baking it into the pretext as something which ‘just happens’.

The *Call of Duty* series has the *hero-victim* at its heart, from its beginnings depicting World War Two, to war in the Middle East, to its speculative future and science-fiction settings. Here, I examine the nuances and differences between these settings through a variety of mythic constructions, motifs and themes. For reference, I have compiled a table of each playable figure in the series (many of the games have multiple), what their military affiliation is and what the setting is. I will refer back to this in some of the subsections.

Playable figure	Game	Affiliation(s)	Setting
Private Martin	<i>Call of Duty</i>	US Army 506 <sup>th</sup> Parachute Infantry Regiment	WWII
Sergeant Evans	<i>Call of Duty</i>	British Army 6 <sup>th</sup> Airborne Division 3 Troop, SAS	WWII
Private Alexei Ivanovich Voronin	<i>Call of Duty</i>	Red Army 13 <sup>th</sup> Guards Rifle Division 2 <sup>nd</sup> Guards Tank Army 3 <sup>rd</sup> Shock Army, 150 <sup>th</sup> Rifle Division	WWII
Private Vasili Ivanovich Koslov	<i>Call of Duty 2</i>	Red Army 13 <sup>th</sup> Guards Rifle Division	WWII
Sergeant John Davis	<i>Call of Duty 2</i>	British Army	WWII

		7 <sup>th</sup> Armoured Division	
Corporal Bill Taylor	<i>Call of Duty 2</i>	US Army 2 <sup>nd</sup> Ranger Battalion	WWII
Private Nichols	<i>Call of Duty 3</i>	US Army 29 <sup>th</sup> and 90 <sup>th</sup> Infantry Divisions	WWII
Sergeant James Doyle	<i>Call of Duty 3</i>	British Army Royal Air Force SOE SAS	WWII
Corporal Joe Cole	<i>Call of Duty 3</i>	Canadian Army 4 <sup>th</sup> Canadian Armoured Division	WWII
Corporal Bohater Wojciech	<i>Call of Duty 3</i>	Polish Army Polish 1 <sup>st</sup> Armored Divi- sion	WWII
Sergeant John "Soap" MacTavish	<i>Call of Duty 4: Modern War- fare</i>	British Army 22 <sup>nd</sup> SAS Regiment	Ultranationalist Crisis (Middle East and Russia)
Sergeant Paul Jackson	<i>Call of Duty 4: Modern War- fare</i>	US Army 1 <sup>st</sup> Force Recon, US Ma- rine Corps	Ultranationalist Crisis
Private C. Miller	<i>Call of Duty: World at War</i>	US Army US Marine Corps Carlson's 2 <sup>nd</sup> Marine Raiders Battalion 1 <sup>st</sup> Marine Division Miller's Reconnaissance Team	WWII
Private Dimitri Petrenko	<i>Call of Duty: World at War</i>	Red Army 62 <sup>nd</sup> Rifle Division 3 <sup>rd</sup> Shock Army	WWII
Sergeant Gary "Roach" Sanderson	<i>Call of Duty: Modern War- fare 2</i>	British Army 22 <sup>nd</sup> SAS Regiment Task Force 141	Ultranationalist Crisis and WWIII
Captain John "Soap" MacTavish	<i>Call of Duty: Modern War- fare 2</i>	British Army 22 <sup>nd</sup> SAS Regiment Task Force 141	Ultranationalist Crisis and WWIII
Private James Ramirez	<i>Call of Duty: Modern War- fare 2</i>	US Army 1 <sup>st</sup> Battalion 75 <sup>th</sup> Ranger Regiment	Ultranationalist Crisis and WWIII

5 Heroes

Private First Class Joseph Allen	<i>Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2</i>	US Army 75th Ranger Regiment Task Force 141	Ultranationalist Crisis and WWIII
Captain Alex Mason	<i>Call of Duty: Black Ops</i>	SOG CIA	Cold War
Special Agent James Hudson	<i>Call of Duty: Black Ops</i>	SOG CIA	Cold War
Staff Sergeant Derek "Frost" Westbrook	<i>Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3</i>	US Army US Army Rangers Team Metal, Delta Force	WWIII
Commander Yuri	<i>Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3</i>	Spetsnaz (formerly) Russian Ultranationalists (formerly) Task Force 141	WWIII
Captain John "Soap" MacTavish	<i>Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3</i>	British Army 22 <sup>nd</sup> SAS Regiment Task Force 141	Ultranationalist Crisis and WWIII
Captain Alex Mason	<i>Call of Duty: Black Ops II</i>	SOG CIA	Cold War
Master Sergeant Frank Woods	<i>Call of Duty: Black Ops II</i>	US Marine Corps SOG CIA	Cold War
Lieutenant Commander David "Section" Mason	<i>Call of Duty: Black Ops II</i>	SEAL Team Six US Navy J-SOC	Near-future (2025)
Sergeant Logan Walker	<i>Call of Duty: Ghosts</i>	US Army Ghosts	Alternate history, near-future South America
Private First Class Jack Mitchell	<i>Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare</i>	US Marine Corps Atlas Corporation Sentinel Task Force	Future (mid-21 <sup>st</sup> century), US, Europe, Asia, Middle East
'Player'	<i>Call of Duty: Black Ops III</i>	Winslow Accord CIA Black Ops DeadKillers	Mid-21 <sup>st</sup> century, Third Cold War
Commander Nick Reyes	<i>Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare</i>	SCAR SATO UNSA Retribution	Distant future, space
Private First Class Ronald "Red" Daniels	<i>Call of Duty: WWII</i>	US Army	WWII

		1 <sup>st</sup> Platoon, 1 <sup>st</sup> Infantry Division 16 <sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment	
Sergeant Kyle Garrick	<i>Call of Duty: Modern Warfare</i> (2019)	British Army SAS Task Force 141 Coalition	Near-future, fictional Urzikstan
Alex	<i>Call of Duty: Modern Warfare</i> (2019)	Delta Force CIA-SAD Urzikstan Liberation Force Coalition Warcom Task Force 141	Near-future, fictional Urzikstan
Farah Karim	<i>Call of Duty: Modern Warfare</i> (2019)	Urzikstan Liberation Force Chimera Allegiance Task Force 141	Near-future, fictional Urzikstan
Bell	<i>Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War</i>	[Possible affiliations; all are player-determined] Soviet Union Perseus CIA KGB	Cold War
Sergeant (later Lieutenant) Arthur Kingsley	<i>Call of Duty: Vanguard</i>	British Army 9 <sup>th</sup> Parachute Battalion Special Operations Taskforce 001 “Vanguard” British Special Operations Executive	WWII
Lieutenant Polina Borisovna Petrova	<i>Call of Duty: Vanguard</i>	Red Army 138 <sup>th</sup> Rifle Division Special Operations Taskforce 001 “Vanguard” Special Operations Taskforce 005 “Shadow”	WWII
Private Lucas Riggs	<i>Call of Duty: Vanguard</i>	20 <sup>th</sup> Brigade, Australian 9 <sup>th</sup> Infantry Division British Eighth Army	WWII

		SOTF 001 “Vanguard” SOTF 004 “Barbarian”	
Lieutenant 1 <sup>st</sup> Class Wade Jackson	<i>Call of Duty: Vanguard</i>	Fighting Squadron 6, US Navy SOTF 001 “Vanguard” SOTF 002 “Hellhounds”	WWII
Sergeant Richard Webb	<i>Call of Duty: Vanguard</i>	British Army SOTF 001 “Vanguard”	WWII

Table 5. A list of all current *Call of Duty* playable figures, what game they appear in, what role they have in their respective military organisations, and which conflict(s) they fight in.

While the important details from this table are analysed in the following sections, a couple of things are worth pointing out immediately. The national militaries represented by protagonists are as follows:

USA	19–21*†
UK	11
USSR/Russia	4–6*‡
Other	4–5† (Polish, Canadian, Australian, Urzik, UN†)

\* In Black Ops Cold War the player can choose between four affiliations.

† Nick Reyes from Infinite Warfare is of American nationality, but the military organisations are part of the United Nations Space Alliance.

‡ Commander Yuri in Modern Warfare 3 is former Spetsnaz.

It is not surprising, but worth having the numbers to show that the US is by far the most well-represented nation in *Call of Duty* militaries, followed by the UK and then the USSR or Russia (to my knowledge, all USSR-affiliated playable figures are also from Russia itself). Of the ‘other’ affiliations, three of them are part of the WWII Allied forces and one is from the fictional country Urzikstan, bordering Russia to the north and Georgia to the east. The fifth is a fictional future UN force. It is telling that despite the series spending a great deal of time in the Middle East, there are no playable figures from there. Also worth noting is that the series frequently uses multiple playable figures per game, often showing the conflict from the perspective of multiple squads. Later, I will also pay closer attention to the varying ranks of the playable figure soldiers: most are elite, but some are conscripts, and which settings they do and do not appear in is important.

## War is hell, war is eternal: The inevitability and perpetuity of war as depoliticising

Since *Call of Duty 2* (Infinity Ward, 2005), most games in the series feature well-known quotes about warfare that appear in loading screens and at the end of missions (particularly in *Call of Duty 2*). But from *Call of Duty 4* onwards, these quotes are usually displayed when the player dies in the singleplayer campaign, often termed “death quotes” (e.g., Gault, 2019). These include strategic wisdom and humorous witticisms:

“Cluster bombing from B-52s are very, very, accurate. The bombs are guaranteed to always hit the ground.” – USAF Ammo Troop (Infinity Ward, 2007)

“Never interrupt your enemy when he is making a mistake.” – Napoleon Bonaparte (Infinity Ward, 2005)

But they are very often also used to reinforce the idea that war is hell, and the soldier is a helpless victim in that hell:

“The soldier above all others prays for peace, for it is the soldier who must suffer and bear the deepest wounds and scars of war.” – General Douglas MacArthur (Infinity Ward, 2005)

“There's no honorable way to kill, no gentle way to destroy. There is nothing good in war. Except its ending.” – Abraham Lincoln (Infinity Ward, 2005)

“Never think that war, no matter how necessary, nor how justified, is not a crime.” – Ernest Hemingway (Infinity Ward, 2005)

“It is well that war is so terrible, or we should get too fond of it.” – Robert E. Lee (Infinity Ward, 2005)

“My first wish is to see this plague of mankind, war, banished from the earth.”  
– George Washington (Infinity Ward, 2009)

There is much that could be said about each of these quotations. It is interesting, for example, that almost all of them talk about war in the abstract, and those that do not are about World War Two. There is also a strong tendency to position tyranny and freedom in opposition to each other and to use that opposition as justification for war as a necessary means to peace and freedom.

Suffice it to say for now that the function of these quotes is to reinforce the idea that *war is hell* and *war is eternal*. Two overriding themes in the quotes are that war is horrific for all the ordinary soldiers involved, and that war is a normal, if unpleasant, fact of human life that cannot be eradicated. And by only discussing war in the abstract, politics are stripped out of it. Because of this, the soldier may be more neatly positioned as a *hero-victim*, uncomplicated by the political context of the conflict. All that matters is that they are an ordinary soldier in a horrible situation, doing their best.

Particularly after the second game in the series, these quotes appear only when the player dies in game. This reinforces it within the context of the gameplay loop: The player dies, which is a ludic defeat or failure to overcome the game's mechanical challenges, and this ludic defeat immediately becomes associated with the death and destruction of war in the abstract. Your ‘suffering’ as a player struggling to beat the mission becomes a metaphor for the suffering of war: futile, repetitive, difficult. This leads to a looping gameplay theme:

ENEMY.SOLDIER SLAYS PLAYER.SOLDIER

→ DEATH.QUOTE APPEARS

PLAYER.SOLDIER REPLAYS SECTION

The motif ENEMY.SOLDIER SLAYS PLAYER.SOLDIER can be seen as connected to the decentralised motif HERO SLAYS DEVIL~MONSTER (Frog, 2021a, p. 176) except inverted (DEVIL~MONSTER SLAYS HERO). This inverted version is unsurprisingly rare in traditional, particularly narrative sources. To the extent that it appears, it is likely to be in a case of a feigned death and a return, a death and then a resurrection, metaphorically as a defeat rather than a final death, a setback, or a simultaneous defeat, like Beowulf slaying the dragon but being killed himself in doing so. No such fictional contextualisation occurs in *Call of Duty* for death, unlike in *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware, 2011), for instance.

Perhaps for that reason when this theme appears in *Call of Duty* games, it is followed by the player *replaying* the section. As if in a narrative mode we were to say, ‘wait, that’s not what *really* happened, let me rewind and tell it again’. The death is treated as purely ludic and not as a true part of the fictional world. That does not mean it is less or not meaningful. On the contrary, these moments of what I might (provocatively) label ludonarrative dissonance must be seen as important to the game, not least of all because the vast majority of *Call of Duty* players will die during their playthrough. And, following Olli Tapio Leino’s assertion that “‘playing not so well’ is equally necessary to facilitate authentic and empathetic analysis of the dizzying formlessness of a playable artifact as existing” (2012). *Call of Duty*’s ‘death loops’ (not in the inescapable sense in which Leino initially uses the term, but loops involving dying nonetheless) show us that although the unusual motif DEVIL~MONSTER SLAYS HERO is invoked, it is also depicted as false. There seems to be a clash between the game as a simulation and the game as trying to narrate a certain sequence of events. As a simulation, the game allows the player to explore something which *could* feasibly happen in the situation being simulated: being shot and killed. But in constructing a mythology, the game then takes back the reins: ‘it *could* happen, but it is not what *should* happen’. Alternatives to the mythological construction are both raised and discarded by the game, the repetition of these multiple permeations reinforcing the omnipresence of war.

All of this is in the context of a long-running series which depicts a number of different real and fictional military contexts. With war depicted in this way over many games, it is not difficult to come to the conclusion that war is hell and war is eternal. Neil C. Renic and Sebastian Kaempf discuss the “‘war is hell’ myth” (2022, p. 1) in first-person shooter games, arguing that this depiction of war is “fatalist”, paralysing the will to improve “the condition of war” (2022, p. 8) and reinforcing the “classic realist depiction of war” that “*inter arma silent leges* (in times of war, the laws fall silent) … war is fundamentally and immutably amoral, a domain within which rules of good conduct cannot and should not apply” (2022, p. 3). To support this, Renic and Kaempf use an example from *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward, 2019), in which Soap says to a subordinate, “you draw the line wherever you need it, Sergeant. End of the day someone has to make the enemy scared of the dark. We get dirty and the world stays clean. That’s the mission”. These aspects are reciprocally reinforcing: the *war is hell* myth allows for this fatalism to flourish, while the fatalism in action getting results over the course of the campaigns reinforces the idea that war is a fundamentally and immutably amoral arena.

## You're on your own, boys: The squad as the depoliticised semantic centre

The squad is of central importance to the *hero-victim* construction as it is manifested in the (especially American) war hero. It is within the context of the squad that heroism emerges here. Heroic acts in these *hero-victim* war mythologies are not so much about materially or substantially advancing the war effort (though that can also happen), but more about ensuring no one gets left behind. Acts of great courage and enormous risk are undertaken to retrieve the injured squad member, for example, even when this endangers the soldier, squad or mission. This heroism emerges within the context of the previously discussed *war is hell, war is eternal* notion when the soldier manages to “hold on to values in the face of all that happens around them” (Barker, 2011, p. 43).

Although no *Call of Duty* game is set in the First World War, the dynamic described previously of the bravery of the ordinary soldier regardless of the political pretext for their being where they are is exemplified by the well-known expression ‘lions led by donkeys’, used particularly in World War One. Ordinary soldiers are the lions—drawing on the mythology of lions as brave, noble, regal, powerful—while the generals are donkeys—incompetent, clumsy, indifferent. While incompetence is not a charge levied so much towards leaders of other conflicts besides World War One, the idea of soldiers as brave lions in a situation manufactured by others remains potent. Leadership is often distant from the conflict, treating soldiers as statistics and pawns. With this backdrop, the true loyalties of ordinary soldiers are towards each other at the level of the squad—the only person you can truly rely on is your comrade-in-arms next to you.

We see this sentiment throughout the *Call of Duty* series, but a particular example is *Call of Duty: WWII*'s (Sledgehammer Games, 2017) ‘Heroic Actions’ system (see ‘Heroic Actions’, 2021). These are a set of voluntary scripted scenarios within each mission which the player must complete within a limited time after they begin. There are three types of ‘Heroic Actions’: coming to the aid of allies in the midst of a struggle; dragging wounded allies to safety; and allowing groups of enemies to surrender when they offer to. Note how, firstly, these actions are voluntary. The overall objectives of each mission are accomplished regardless. ‘Heroic Actions’ do not contribute to the overall war effort. Secondly, they are focused on putting oneself at risk to save lives, mostly those of comrades. And, thirdly, through accepting enemy surrender offers, they are also about recognising humanity on the battlefield, even that of the enemy. The political context is not important, what matters is saving lives and being merciful. It is a tacit recognition of the notion that Nazi soldiers are also, in some sense, ‘lions led by donkeys’, innocent of the political situation and led astray by their leadership.

An even more extreme example of this is found in *Modern Warfare 2* (Infinity Ward, 2009). The big twist of the game’s plot is when Lieutenant General Shepherd, commander of both the US Army Rangers and the fictional multinational Task Force 141—members of both of which the player controls at various points—is revealed to be the true architect of World War Three, and subsequently attempts to kill the members of Task Force 141. Discovering the betrayal, John “Soap” MacTavish and Captain John Price resolve to kill Shepherd as

revenge, being declared war criminals as a result. The message is that one can only trust one's squad, and that one must remain loyal to the squad no matter the political consequences.

Interestingly, this example then merges three of the hero-types discussed: the *hero-victim*, the *hero-sceptic* and the *unsung hero*. The KNOWLEDGE.AUTHORITY for the *hero-sceptic* is filled by Shepherd as the military leadership. Once the conspiracy is uncovered, the *hero-victim* soldiers are punished by the knowledge authority by having their heroism covered up, construed instead as war criminals (invoking the *unsung hero* as a partial). These aspects feed off each other: you can trust your squad because they alone are truly loyal to you; you must rise above and beyond to defend and save your squad because they are the only ones you can truly trust. The squad provides one of the primary contexts for the heroism of the *hero-victim*: heroism that arises not out of furthering the war effort or any grand act, but out of maintaining humanity and loyalty in the face of hellish environmental circumstances and misanthropic political machinations.

## Military techno-fetishism and selective realism

With each *Call of Duty* game comes a cornucopia of guns, gear and gizmos. Each has myriad attachments, alterations, modifications and customisation options, accompanied by reams of detailed information. Matthew Thomas Payne explores how *Call of Duty 4* was marketed via this particular mode of military realism:

Video game marketing of commercial military shooters largely works to collapse the divide between textual realisticness with any broader understandings of “realism” to argue that their game’s attention to technical detail offers the necessary representational and simulational bona fides to engender an immersive reality available to any who might buy their electronic wares. Thus, the marketing campaigns for post-9/11 military shooters are overwhelmingly concerned with selling only select elements of military realisticness: sophisticated enemy artificial intelligence, military weapons and vehicles that function and look like the real thing, and combat that unfolds in authentic theaters of war, both historic and those “ripped from today’s headlines.” (2012, pp. 309–310)

This striving towards a sense of military realism plays also into the broader “cult of national security” as historian Walter L. Hixson describes it, the “exaltation of American exceptionalism, demonization of foreign and domestic political enemies, and promotion of military technology and new weapons systems” (1993, p. 613). The fetishization of American military technology via the painstaking, encyclopedic cataloguing of weaponry in *Call of Duty* games (particularly those set during conflicts after WWII) is one of the modalities through which American exceptionalism is expressed. Andrew J. Salvati and Jonathan M. Bullinger describe this kind of military technological fetishism as a part of selective authenticity rooted in “mythologized weaponry” (2013, p. 159), whereby games strive for hyperdetailed realism in certain areas—such as armaments—but are happy with speculation and fantasy in others. They

argue that first-person shooters like *Call of Duty* “act as rich environments for this kind of fetishism due to their focus on weapons as the primary tool for accomplishing objectives and the player’s immediate perspective” (2013, p. 159).

This is borne out throughout the series, where missions often centre around advanced weaponry freshly introduced to the player as a means of completing a mission. ‘Death from Above’ in *Call of Duty 4* has the player control the guns of an AC-130H Spectre gunship; ‘The Only Easy Day... Was Yesterday’ introduces the player of *Modern Warfare 2* to the game-play mechanic breach and clear, whereby a door is opened with C4 and the playable figure immediately enters and the gametime slows down, allowing the player to dramatically pick off enemies with ease with their silenced SCAR-H with thermal sight that renders enemies visible through the smoke. The mission ‘Celerium’ in *Black Ops II* (Treyarch, 2012), set in 2025, introduces the Millimeter Scanner, a weapon attachment that pulses periodically, revealing otherwise obscured enemies within 25 metres.

This kind of *selective* realism works to mask the unreality elements of the games that are *not* realistic. Payne argues:

The entertainment industry purposefully conflates the war game’s ability to render photorealistic graphics and surround sound with broader notions of experiential realism. Militainment producers ... wage this kind of campaign because the discursive slippage muddies the proverbial waters, helping them sidestep criticisms that their wares elide unpleasant aspects of warfare such as the killing of civilians and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), while celebrating more palatable elements like spectacular explosions, battlefield tactics, and recreations of historical firefights. (2014, p. 267)

These kinds of elisions, Soraya Murray (2018, pp. 150–151) argues, work to depoliticise the spaces of war while masking that depoliticisation behind a seemingly realistic front. Applied to *Call of Duty*, the painstaking attention to detail in some aspects works on two levels. On one level, it muddies the waters. Rather than simply working with the premise that ‘this game is fundamentally realistic’ or the opposite, each aspect of the game would have to be examined separately, because some aspects are very realistic and others not, but it does not signpost which. On another level, it may guide a player’s base assumption—consciously or unconsciously—to the notion that ‘this game is fundamentally realistic’, causing players to *assume* at least a level of realism from aspects they otherwise know little about. *Because I know that the game has paid great attention to detail when it comes to the guns, I will assume that the same fidelity applies to x aspect, broadly speaking.* Of course, reasonable people will, if interrogated, accept that not all aspects of *Call of Duty* are likely to be realistic.

Though writing primarily about written fiction, psycholinguist Richard J. Gerrig’s (1998) arguments regarding the suspension of disbelief are useful here. In contrast to the received wisdom that when we enter a narrative world we willingly ‘suspend our disbelief’ for the duration of our stay there, Gerrig concludes through psychological experiments that “persuasion by fiction is the *default* outcome: it is only under circumstances encouraging special scrutiny that readers will treat the fictional information in such a fashion that its impact is attenuated” (1998, p. 227). In other words, Gerrig contends that by default we accept fictional

information as true, and that “special effort is required to prevent such information from affecting real-world beliefs” (1998, p. 227). He links this to Baruch Spinoza’s theory of epistemology, who in Gerrig’s summary “argued that the acceptance of belief is an automatic concomitant of comprehension. ‘Unacceptance’ may follow later, but the initial product of ordinary cognitive processing is a belief in the understood propositions” (Gerrig, 1998, p. 227). In a case like *Call of Duty*, this would seem especially relevant: verifiably super-realistic elements prime us to accept the rest of the game as truth, unless we put special effort into considering it.

## One-man army: The player as supersoldier

At this point, it is important to note that in *Call of Duty* games, the player often does *not* play as ‘ordinary’ soldiers. In Table 5 showing the main playable protagonists of the series’ singleplayer campaigns,<sup>24</sup> around 30 are members of ‘elite’ squads, while 10 are ‘ordinary’ soldiers.<sup>25</sup> Of the ordinary soldiers, almost all are found in the World War Two games. In *Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward, 2007), for instance, the player mostly plays as two characters: Sergeant Paul Jackson of the Marines 1<sup>st</sup> Force Recon, and Sergeant John “Soap” MacTavish of the British 22<sup>nd</sup> SAS Regiment. Both of these playable figures are a part of elite British and United States military outfits. There is perhaps an obvious reason why these elite soldiers are more represented in the series: being an authentic, low-ranking, ordinary soldier is not most people’s idea of fun. An elite soldier, with better equipment and more training, would undertake far more daring and individually impactful missions. But the supersoldier would seem to be at odds with the *hero-victim* as described thus far. How can such a powerful fighter be a ‘victim’ of war? In some ways, this might be seen as an attempt to merge the WWI/II *hero-victim* with the Achillean or Herculean model of heroism, where part of their heroism lies in their impossible prowess.

Closely related to the fetishization of military technology discussed previously is also the mythologisation of elite military forces, which lend themselves to supersoldier constructions. This fetishization is particularly prevalent with the US Navy SEALs and the British SAS, but also applies to varying extents to elite outfits worldwide, such as the Russian Alpha Group, the Spanish Fuerza de Guerra Naval Especial, the Danish Frømandskorpset, the Israeli Sayeret Matkal and the Pakistani SSG. There is a widespread reverence for the resilience and superhuman prowess of these elite units, far beyond the strictly military sphere. They are instead cast as the most elite members of society *in general*.

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<sup>24</sup> By some counts, there are over 200 playable characters in the main *Call of Duty* series (‘Category:Playable Characters’, 2021), including John F. Kennedy and a dog named Riley. In my list, I have focused on the ‘main’ playable characters, ignoring those played for only one or two missions, for only a short section of a mission, or in other gamemodes than the singleplayer campaign. In other words, playable protagonists and/or main characters, rather than all playable characters.

<sup>25</sup> There is naturally some ambiguity with regards to which squads, teams, divisions or military branches are considered ‘elite’. In my count, I include real-life forces well-established as ‘elite’, such as the British SAS, US Army Rangers and Navy SEALs; covert or deep-cover operatives like CIA agents; and I have used my judgement for the series’ fictional outfits, such as Task Force 141, SOTF 001 “Vanguard”, or the Ghosts (most of which are self-described as elite within the games).

There is almost no realm of public life in which special forces are not taken to be the most extreme, the most perfect, the ideal, the optimal. Studies have been conducted using elite military operators as models for the mental fortitude of medical surgeons (Deshauer et al., 2021) and mindfulness techniques for high-reliability organisations such as air traffic control and nuclear power plants (Fraher et al., 2017). Beyond scientific studies, one does not need to look far to find articles and listicles idealising elite military units. For example, ‘10 Navy SEAL Life Lessons You Can Use Every Day’ (Voisin, 2014), or ‘Life lessons from special forces hero Ant Middleton’ (Hayes, 2018). Ex-special forces soldiers can find lucrative publishing opportunities with a public desperate to read not only about their ‘adventures’ but also their outlook on life, training regimens and tips for business. A brief look at the website of the British bookshop chain Waterstones, for example, shows a dedicated section for ‘Special & Elite Forces Books’ with 1,724 items<sup>26</sup> (‘Special & Elite Forces Books’, 2022). I remember one such author, Chris Ryan, author of books including *How to Stay Safe in a Dangerous World: Survival Techniques for Everyday Life from an SAS Hero* (2018), visiting my secondary school (ages 11–18 in the British system). This was not with the (explicit, at least) intention of recruiting anyone to the military—this was a more academically-inclined school—but to share his more broadly-applicable life lessons derived from his time in the SAS.

This is all to show the prevalence of the mythologisation of special forces. They are the *ultimate* resilient humans and survivalists. They are taken as a paradigm for anything related to high bodily performance (strength, endurance, stamina, pain threshold, holding one’s breath), self-reliance in the wilderness or other dangerous places, and control over body and mind. There is no doubt a kernel of truth to this. Highly trained military operatives are, after all, trained in many of these areas. But the extent to which their abilities, skills and philosophy are treated also as optimal in sphere of public life far beyond the military demonstrates the mythical quality this phenomenon has taken on.

So how does the mythology of elite special forces interact with the *hero-victim*? It might be the case that the elite soldier as playable figure in many *Call of Duty* games undermines the *hero-victim* construction, bringing it closer to an Achillean model whereby heroism is inherent and expressed through great prowess. The modern supersoldier variant of this might be that heroism is *trained* and expressed through great prowess. In other words, it is not by being the offspring of a god that one becomes a hero, rather heroism (or the capacity for it) is developed through military training. The British army’s main recruitment slogan is “Be the Best”. Army training is not just training to perform a job competently, it is pitched as overall, superlative self-improvement. One of the lead slogans for the British Royal Navy is “Made in the Royal Navy”, implying that the training process is a process for making a person as a whole.

But we still see that in much war hero media even elite soldiers positioned as victims, such as with Soap and Price in *Modern Warfare 2*, or in the film *Black Hawk Down* (Scott, 2001). Part of this is perhaps due to a tension between the unpopularity of most modern wars

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<sup>26</sup> At the time of writing. In just the time between one draft of this section in June 2021 and these revisions I write now almost exactly one year later in 2022, 76 new books in this section were published. Enthusiasts of special forces literature must struggle to keep up!

and the reverence for elite soldiers. To put it bluntly, we want to valorise the elite soldiers, but they cannot be seen to enjoy it or to think they are too righteous. By being positioned as victims, they can be praised as skilled operators doing their job despite hellish circumstances.

In games like *Call of Duty*, there are also two particularities worth examining. The first is to return to that incongruence between plot and gameplay, whereby the player's death, for instance, is not considered 'truly' part of the story, and so the player is given unlimited chances to retry. This also applies to successfully progressing through each level. Only certain tasks will actually contribute to progression: certain enemies need to be killed, or a position needs to be reached, or some objective secured. Until that section's specific objective is completed, it is often the case that enemies will infinitely respawn. In the same way that the player's death is not treated as 'true', so too are other actions. In the game's fiction, only certain core actions are acknowledged and not, for example, the singlehanded slaughter of scores of infinite opponents.

The second is that for acts of heroism to emerge on the battlefield is not easy, even with powerful military technology and extensive training. To put it frankly, if the circumstances were truly realistic, most players as *Call of Duty* soldiers would probably never fire their weapon, let alone hit an enemy, let alone drag a wounded ally from the fight while taking down a dozen enemies in the process. To allow the player into the fantasy of rising to heroism, the scales must be heavily tipped in their favour via enhanced ludic affordances. These enhanced affordances are much more plausibly explained by employing the mythology of special forces soldiers. And, conversely, the depiction then of special forces soldiers in *Call of Duty* games reinforces the prevalent special forces mythology.

## **The ordinary soldier: The supersoldier can be anyone**

Those ten 'ordinary' soldiers, found mostly in the WWII games, are also worth exploring, however. Many elements remain the same here—a soldier rises to an act of heroism in service of their nearest comrades—but the context is different. Rather than being a highly trained soldier from whom we might expect displays of great skill, even if not heroism, these are soldiers who have little to no training and have perhaps even been conscripted, but who rise to heroism regardless. This aligns more with the *Saving Private Ryan* (Spielberg, 1998) genre of WWII narratives: the tragedy of war forcing young men to fight and die, and from those tragic circumstances come acts of great heroism. Instead of heroism being something either inherent or developed through training, the 'ordinary soldier' reflects much more the "banality of heroism" (Z. Franco & Zimbardo, 2006).

This is quite straightforwardly employed in the WWII games, where the soldiers are identified easily as 'ordinary' by having a low rank (such as private), as well as by the kinds of missions they go on. In *Call of Duty*, this is also more structurally supported by the campaigns. *Call of Duty* games typically have at least two protagonists. All of the games before *Ghosts* (Infinity Ward, 2013) feature at least two, while most from *Ghosts* onwards feature one—broken by *Modern Warfare* (Infinity Ward, 2019) and *Vanguard* (Sledgehammer Games,

2021). The player switches between many characters, some of whom are elite, some not, some more elite than others, and each in different squads and campaigns around the world. This structurally supports the notion that heroism can come from anyone, whether you're a US Army Ranger or a private in the Red Army. *Call of Duty* campaigns have multiple playable figures precisely to show the player that there is not one single hero, but that each squad is made up of heroes either potential or actual. This suggests a heroism of the soldier *as such*, that being in the military—any military—is sufficient foundation for heroism.

## The unsung hero of war

In *Modern Warfare 3* (Infinity Ward & Sledgehammer Games, 2011), Capitan Price says:

There's a clocktower in Hereford where the names of the dead are inscribed.  
We try to honor their deeds, even as their faces fade from our memory. Those  
memories are all that's left, when the bastards have taken everything else.  
(Infinity Ward & Sledgehammer Games, 2011)

The *unsung hero* is a prominent aspect of war heroism, both as a partial and as a meta-type. As a partial (RISK~CONSEQUENCE=HERO IS.FORGOTTEN~MISATTRIBUTED~VILIFIED) we see this clearly in the example I raised earlier of Soap and Price in *Modern Warfare 2* being painted as war criminals after the betrayal of their general. The *unsung hero* as a more complete type is exemplified in the intro to the first *Call of Duty* game (Infinity Ward, 2003), which features text over war photos that reads: "In the war that changed the world, victory was not achieved by one man but by the lives of many" (2003). This sentiment seems antiheroic in a sense, but this antiheroism is undermined by the heroic actions of individual playable figures throughout the game.

In the military context in general, the *unsung hero* also appears as an immanent motif. An immanent motif is one that "could happen under certain conditions, such as if a taboo is violated" (Frog, 2021a, p. 184). It is a motif whose presence is felt as threat or potentiality. Immanent motifs are marked by curly brackets. Immanent motifs are also often implicit; implicit motifs are marked by square brackets. The *unsung hero* can appear as an immanent motif, one which is quite central to warfare in general and especially war and heroism. Since 1906, identification of the dead has been included in the Geneva Convention (International Committee of the Red Cross, 1906, art. 4). This was influenced by the German *Erkennungs-marke*, introduced in 1878 as a proto-dog-tag (Ashbridge & O'Mara, 2020). The importance of being able to identify the dead and wounded is exemplified by the mythical centrality of the dog tag and other similar means of identification. The *unsung hero* lurks behind these customs as an implicit, immanent motif:

SOLDIER WEARS DOG TAG  
[← {SOLDIER IS.KILLED AND FORGOTTEN}]

That the soldier may die and be forgotten (whether they have committed heroic acts or not) does not have to be brought up explicitly. The fear is implied by the importance of identification and the urge to remember the dead as in the example I began this section with from *Modern Warfare 3*. The fact that this applies (or *should* apply) to one's enemies as much as

for one's comrades underscores the centrality of it: remembering the dead goes beyond the conflict, no matter how justified.

The *unsung hero* is also a central part of the heroic premise of the *Black Ops* subseries. On the Steam store page for the first *Black Ops* (Treyarch, 2010), the pitch evokes this hero-type:

Call of Duty®: Black Ops will take you behind enemy lines as a member of an elite special forces unit engaging in covert warfare, classified operations, and explosive conflicts across the globe. With access to exclusive weaponry and equipment, your actions will tip the balance during the most dangerous time period mankind has ever known. ... You will play as an elite Black Ops soldier in deniable operations where if you are caught, captured or killed, your country will disavow all knowledge of your existence. (*Call of Duty®: Black Ops on Steam*, 2010)

The elite *Black Ops* soldier then is predicated on (a) being able to “tip the balance during the most dangerous time period mankind has ever known”, but (b) not being able to be celebrated for it because the operations are deniable, and (c) self-sacrifice is not rewarded even by any kind of heroic martyrdom, as failure of any kind results in your existence being annihilated. In this way, the *Black Ops* heroes more fully embody the *unsung hero* as a type in its own right, rather than as a partial—it is fundamental to their construction.

The motif, SQUAD IS.ABANDONED~BETRAYED~UNREACHABLE BY:SUPERIOR.AUTHORITY is found in most *Call of Duty* games, but in *Black Ops* this is characterised to fit the *unsung hero*. The SQUAD is a very small, tightly-knit group of covert operatives—unlike other squads which may involve an authority figure, one or two more senior soldiers, and a number of inexperienced troops. That the SQUAD is ABANDONED~BETRAYED~UNREACHABLE becomes here a part of the knowing, consensual heroic self-sacrifice. Rather than a possible risk or consequence of their heroic actions, being abandoned and unreachable is a prerequisite for the mission and thus factored into the heroic self-sacrifice. This unsungness is shown to remain as well after the deeds. *Black Ops II* (Treyarch, 2012) shows that in the intervening years, Alex Mason (protagonist of the first *Black Ops*) retired to live in anonymity in Alaska (before being dragged back in, of course).

Here too the *Black Ops* soldier remains largely innocent, however. In the first *Black Ops*, for example, Alex Mason is ordered by President John F. Kennedy himself to assassinate an enemy. *Black Ops* agents are largely ordered around by handlers, with little needed in the way of justification. This compounds with the fact that Mason undergoes brainwashing when held captive by the enemy, and so it is ambiguous to what extent he is even in full control of his own actions.

## Discussion

*Call of Duty* on the whole presents a simple model of heroism, exploring the *hero-victim* construction mostly straightforwardly in a variety of warfare contexts from WWII to the

Cold War to fictional modern conflicts to speculative future conflicts. Typically, *Call of Duty*'s heroes are constructed as such:

- A1. INNOCENT.SOLDIER IS.ORDERED TO:WARZONE
- A2. SQUAD IS.ABANDONED~BETRAYED~UNREACHABLE  
BY:SUPERIOR.AUTHORITY
- B. INNOCENT.SOLDIER RISKS SELF TO:SAVE SQUAD~INNOCENT.CIVILIANS AND  
COMPLETE:OBJECTIVES

A soldier goes to a warzone. The soldier is more or less ‘innocent’, though this depiction can change. For example, the innocence is more prevalent in cases of conscription and the ‘ordinary’ soldier, particularly of WWII, and less so of professional and/or elite soldiers. With that said innocent here also refers to the political circumstances. Even the elite soldiers are not depicted as being responsible for the political situation and nor do they usually share any opinion on it: they are there to ‘do their job’ without judgement. Their greatest loyalty is to their squad, within which an ironclad comradery is developed. When that squad is inevitably left on their own—whether due to a tactical abandonment, an outright betrayal, or by simply being too far behind enemy lines—this comradery is foregrounded. The player goes to great lengths to ensure the safety of their squad while also doing their duty and attempting to complete the objectives. This broadly puts *Call of Duty* in line with most modern war hero narratives, as analysed by scholars like Barker (2011) and Ramsay (2015a, 2015b). When looking at these mythologies together, there are a few things I want to underscore. In particular, *Call of Duty* is interesting for how its mythological construction differs depending on what and when the conflict being depicted is.

The idea that ‘war is hell’ is a rather uncontroversial statement, but still (or rather because of that) warrants attention as a mythological construction. One of the functions of this mythology is to decontextualise and depoliticise conflicts. The focus of these games (and much war hero media) is on the squad, the bond between squadmates, and survival. The political context is not totally absent, it is just not the focus. In most of the games set after the Cold War, the political context is present, but flattened and, crucially, fictionalised. In the *Modern Warfare* subseries, we do not fight a deeply controversial war in Iraq to depose Saddam Hussein, or a war in Afghanistan to depose the Taliban and capture Osama bin Laden. Instead, we fight the fictional Khaled Al-Asad, leader of the fictional OpFor, who comes to power in a violent military coup, the reasons for which are not given, beyond a generic lust for power, in an unnamed Arab country. The Russian plot of *Modern Warfare* that runs concurrently with the OpFor conflict is similarly politically shallow, featuring a civil war between the Russian state and group called the Ultranationalists who, as the *Call of Duty Wiki* puts it, “idolize the Soviet Union out of a sense of national pride, though their actual commitment to communist political and economic ideals are left ambiguous and unknown” (‘Ultranationalists’, 2021).

In contrast, the series’ WWII narratives are allowed to be less fictionalised and more specific. This, I argue, is in part because there is much greater moral consensus surrounding it. Holger Pötzsch and Vit Šisler also note this distinction between the “morally rather unambiguous narrative of ... fighting the good war against unequivocally evil Nazi soldiers”

and “the more hidden, paranoid, and morally ambiguous forms of military intervention”, connecting this also to the shift from ordinary soldiers to special forces or covert operatives (2019, p. 9). Military techno-fetishism aids this supersoldier mythology, while also contributing to a certain sense of realism and plausibility, even if the political context of the wars can be highly fictionalised. The fictional conflicts are given greater plausibility by the fact that such care is taken to represent every last detail of the M16A4 assault rifle (for example).

The *Black Ops* subseries would seem to be an exception, focusing on the real Cold War, but crucially here the games focus only on those necessarily unknowable parts, the black operations. This covert context allows for plenty of space to fill in fictional justifications. For example, some of *Black Ops* takes place in Vietnam. This would seem to run counter to my argument that controversial real conflicts are always abstracted and fictionalised in *Call of Duty*. However, the way *Black Ops* is structured allows them to tackle it. Interestingly, one of the four (then three) rotating *Call of Duty* development studios, Sledgehammer Games, was at the beginning of the 2010s developing *Call of Duty: Vietnam*. This was cancelled in 2011 after eight months of development (albeit with the door left open to returning to the title). In an interview, Glen Schofield, co-founder and then-studio-leader, said

We found out as we were researching it as well, all around the world it's actually known as America's war. Not Vietnam's. We were the only ones that called it the Vietnam War. It's kind of unpopular. And we didn't really understand the marketing aspect of that. (Dumitrescu, 2014)

Andrei Dumitrescu (2014) notes in the article that the series has focused on “the spectacle of war and on the inevitable victory of the good guys, an attitude that would be poorly suited” for a controversial conflict like Vietnam, and that the publisher Activision would be “unlikely to approve more work on the game at the moment, given ... the risks that a Vietnam-themed experience would introduce”. *Black Ops* can get away with it because the subseries explicitly explores the necessarily unproveable, unknown parts of the conflict. Clemens Reisner (2013) applies Eva Horn’s (2007) concept of the *political secret* to *Black Ops*. “According to Horn, fiction allows for enough latitude to speak or speculate about political configurations that cannot be discussed in the political sphere proper ... *Black Ops*'s narrative clearly aims at entering the realm of the political secret” (Reisner, 2013, pp. 255–256). *Black Ops*' clandestine focus offers plenty of space for fictional justification, as well as the possibility to avoid the most controversial aspects of the war itself by remaining in the realm of the political secret.

This all suggests something about the political structure of *Call of Duty*: the ‘good guys’ must win, and the player must be able to be a hero. Fostering heroism is difficult when the game cannot justify the conflict to the player in clean-cut terms; this is easy for WWII, but requires much more abstraction and adaptation for most other conflicts. In this way, even elite soldiers can escape the political ramifications of their involvement in more controversial conflicts, because they are either involved in less ambiguous real conflicts, or in real conflicts adapted and abstracted to be less ambiguous. With this backdrop, war is presented as inevitable and eternal, rather than as the avoidable culmination of political choices. As such, we are encouraged to focus less on the political context of the conflict and more on the

immediate, pitiable circumstances of the soldiers we control and their comrades—fertile ground for the *hero-victim*.

The depoliticising ‘war is hell’ notion is both corroborated by and provides context for the construction of the lone squad as central. This is the idea that out on the battlefield or deep behind enemy lines, the only people one can truly rely on are one’s squadmates. These bonds are both proof and product of ‘war is hell’: the horror of the circumstances forces close bonds, and it is through their bond and their need to help each other that we see that war is hell. For the elite soldier, this is partly exacerbated by their being so far behind enemy lines that becoming unreachable by superior authorities becomes a real risk. In some of these circumstances, such as in *Modern Warfare 2* (2009), the *hero-sceptic* is also invoked partly as a way to deflect anticipated criticisms of the war hero mythology. That is, these *hero-sceptic* elements admit that there are political issues with the war and that the military is not a purely morally good force, but places responsibility for that onto those very senior superiors. At the squad level, soldiers are not corrupt, but at the level of general they may be, but that is because they are not experiencing the horror of war first hand.

With this as the setting, the ‘one-man army’ supersoldier mythology seems contradictory. However, it instead functions as the player’s primary means to heroism. True heroism is hard, and so to allow each and every player the opportunity to be a hero, the playable figure needs to have a superhuman capacity for incredible feats of strength, survival and skill. For the average player to not simply be killed over and over, the playable figure needs to be able to withstand being shot without being in pain or incapacitated (or killed). They need strength, skill and stamina to fire an assault rifle as accurately as the player’s mouse or controller aims for as long as they shoot, and for as long as the mission continues. While the supersoldier does have significant differences from the ‘ordinary’ soldier in terms of their depiction, their model of heroism is aligned by the fact that the player switches often between playable figures, from the lowliest private to the most highly trained SAS operative. This demonstrates that, for *Call of Duty*, heroism can come from *any* soldier on the battlefield and that, simultaneously, the most extraordinarily trained elite soldiers can end up victimised and forgotten.

Each of these mythologies contribute to the construction of *Call of Duty*’s heroic mythology, which remains remarkably stable across each title regardless of setting, and which greatly draws on those of popular media, both WWII and modern conflicts. Since the marked shift in heroic mythology sparked by WWI, the fundamentals of heroism have remained broadly similar. Each conflict and context characterises that heroism differently, and this is primarily based on improving military technology, the professionalisation of militaries, the prevalence of elite forces and the specific political context.

In terms of the mythological cycle, *Call of Duty* quite straightforwardly takes war hero mythologies and adapts them to the play context. The series does not seek to undermine or challenge, for example, the nobility of the soldier on the battlefield, or the importance of the squad, or the isolation of the individual soldier from the political context. The player is given the superhuman affordances to easily rise to heroism in these circumstances via the playable figures, offering an accessible fantasy of rising from the hell of war to become a hero. What is interesting within that is precisely how stable that heroic construction is throughout the

series despite the many different settings and kinds of soldier-playable-figure. The game is designed in service of that heroic construction, rather than that heroic construction emerging from the design. This is apparent both in how many different facets are adapted to it—settings, soldiers, gameplay, progression of events over the course of the campaign—but also in what is excluded and what is not possible—Vietnam, Iraq, ‘the good guys’ losing or finding their war unjustified, soldiers taking personal political responsibility.

This also explains how the series can have such different settings and characters and plots but still have some *Call of Duty* feeling. Of course, in part this is a franchise that trades off the name. It is profitable for each game to bear the name *Call of Duty*. But through this analysis, we can also see that the *hero-victim* provides a mythic semantic centre around which each game can orbit. With this core, each game can exhibit a Wittgensteinian family resemblance, a *Call of Duty*-ness that does not rely on any concrete aspect being duplicated across all games.

## 5.6 The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

From the selective fetishism of war realism to high fantasy, I now turn to one of the most prominent fantasy roleplaying games of recent times: *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011). The player controls the Dragonborn, described in the game's lore solely by a prophecy as “a warrior with the body of a mortal and the soul of a dragon” (2011). That “body of a mortal” is intentionally vague, as the playable figure is highly customisable. The Dragonborn can belong to any of the game’s races, can be male or female, have any colour hair, a wide variety of body shapes, and so on. They can join or not join most of the game’s factions. They can side with the Empire’s Imperial Legions or with the anti-Imperial Stormcloak Rebellion. Their origins are simply ‘unknown’. The Dragonborn is therefore an unambiguous *preordained hero*, a *hero of prophecy*. Unlike the other processes of hero creation and worship—such as the *hero-victim* or the *hero-sceptic*—*Skyrim*’s myth of the hero is instantiated *first*, with the contextualised, corporal being coming *after*.

*Skyrim* is set in a region called Skyrim, the northernmost on the continent of Tamriel. The Empire is the dominant political force on the continent, headquartered in Cyrodiil, which borders Skyrim to the south. A prominent questline throughout the game is the Skyrim Civil War, in which the Stormcloak Rebellion fights back against increasing Imperial dominion over the region. The game’s main questline focuses on the re-emergence of dragons in Skyrim, the first in an age. One of these dragons is the legendary Alduin, the World-Eater, prophesied to return to be defeated by the Last Dragonborn, the player. *Skyrim* is an openworld game, however, well-known for the breadth of different things one can do. It is commonly joked that most players ignore the main questline after the first few mandatory parts, focusing instead on the wealth of sidequests that can be found all over Skyrim. These include questlines related to various factions such as the Thieves Guild, the Companions, the College of Winterhold and the Dark Brotherhood. Players may also adopt a variety of playstyles, from a sword-wielder to a stealth archer to a mage. The *Elder Scrolls* (1994–2022) as a whole is notorious for having a wealth of ‘lore’: a deep well of emulated mythology and history distributed throughout the games via in-game books, dialogue, the environment and so on. Most players do not engage with the vast, vast majority of this lore, and so I do not give it undue focus in my analyses, focusing instead on the more prominently displayed parts of *Skyrim*. However, this lore is important to a dedicated community of players, who gather it in the aptly named *Imperial Library* (<https://www.imperial-library.info/>), collecting the text of all in-game books and other lore material.

### Fate and prophecy: The Dragonborn as preordained hero

*Skyrim*’s *preordained hero* revolves around ‘The Prophecy of the Dragonborn’:

- When misrule takes its place at the eight corners of the world
- When the Brass Tower walks and Time is reshaped
- When the thrice-blessed fail and the Red Tower trembles
- When the Dragonborn Ruler loses his throne, and the White Tower falls

When the Snow Tower lies sundered, kingless, bleeding  
The World-Eater wakes, and the Wheel turns upon the Last Dragonborn.  
(2011)

In-game, this can be found during the quest ‘Alduin’s Wall’ as a large mural within Sky Haven Temple in The Reach. Recall the construction of the *preordained hero, hero of prophecy* I outlined:

- A. SUPERNATURAL.AGENT PROPHESES DEVIL AND HERO
- B. DEVIL EMERGES
- C. HERO EMERGES
- D. HERO SLAYS DEVIL

In *Skyrim*, this decentralised plot is rendered more specifically as such:

- A. ELDER.SCROLLS~AKAVIRI.WISEMEN PROPHESE WORLD-EATER AND LAST.DRAGONBORN
- B. WORLD-EATER.ALDUIN EMERGES
- C. PLAYABLE.FIGURE DISCOVERS THEY=LAST.DRAGONBORN
- D. LAST.DRAGONBORN DEFEATS WORLD-EATER.ALDUIN IN:SOVNGARDE

As a heroic role, the *hero of prophecy* contains within it two important facets.

The first is that there exist fundamental forces of good and evil (or some similar dichotomy), and that there is a balance between them. The prophecy—especially in fantasy—tends to put forth these two sides: the great terror and the equivalent but opposite hero. *Skyrim*’s prophecy at Alduin’s Wall lists five key events that preface the apocalyptic dragon Alduin’s return, but ends with, “The World-Eater wakes, and the Wheel turns upon the Last Dragonborn”. Rarely does a prophecy such as this end with “and the Wheel turns upon collective action and mass organisation and mobilisation”. So, the *hero of prophecy* establishes a binary: a great evil on one side, and a great individual on the other.

The second is that this heroism is not aspirational, at least directly, because one cannot become a hero through training or strength of mind or will. The hero is preordained. The key point is that heroism in this mode is not something one can aspire to *become*, even if one can admire or emulate it. If you were born in *Skyrim* and are not Dragonborn then you can forget about defeating Alduin. Doing heroic deeds and being called a hero as a result is therefore *recognition* of the character’s already heroic being, rather than the heroic deeds *making* them a hero. In this way, the player’s heroism is pre-assured and not contingent on what they do or do not do. They are, inescapably, the *preordained hero*. Despite being a game which puts great emphasis on its open world and a highly customisable playable figure, the preordained heroism is guaranteed. This provides an anchor, lending more freedom to the rest of the game.

## You can go your own way: Choice, customisation and mythic reconfiguration

Choice is a fundamental aspect of *Skyrim*. This is emphasised in the game's marketing: "Skyrim reimagines and revolutionizes the open-world fantasy epic, bringing to life a complete virtual world open for you to explore any way you choose" (*The Elder Scrolls / Skyrim*, n.d.). This seems at odds with the prophecy angle I have analysed so far. How can the preordination of prophecy square with the prospect of total freedom? The two aspect combines in interesting ways. Here, I break down three strands of choice and openness in *Skyrim*.

### Choice in an open world

Vlad Melnic observes an interesting tension in his treatment of *Skyrim* as a "postmodern epic" (2018, p. 153). He notes that there is both a more traditional mode of heroism portrayed—the chosen one, the great evil they rise against and so on—and the "anti-heroic", portrayed in elements of the game like vampirism and lycanthropy (both of which can afflict the playable figure), the ability to worship and follow 'evil' deities, and the popular tendency within the playerbase to ignore the main questline in favour of the mundane and the banal (2018, pp. 163–164). That there are meaningful choices in the game speaks to how successfully *Skyrim* fosters the openworld roleplaying game credo of allowing the player to be whoever they want to be. Melnic argues that this "transforms the experience of the epic, as traditionally understood, into a possibility to actively engage in self-becoming" (2018, p. 168).

This popular mode of play ties into the broader mythology of the 'self-made' person, the isolated, individual making of the self into whatever one wants. I have used the example of the *self-made billionaire* before which draws on this, a construction which seeks to naturalise the erasure of the impact that other individuals, structures and communities have in the construction of our self, positing instead that 'I, alone, made me'. Such mythologies of self-making have in recent times been most prominently weaponised by libertarian and neoliberal politics, asserting that one should only be responsible for oneself, over whom one has complete and total control. We see this mythology played out in and influenced by works about the American frontier, for example: the romantic notion of a man and his family claiming a plot of land and building a self-sustaining homestead.

This is not to say that *Skyrim* is a neoliberal Western. But there is a noteworthy tension here between this strain of individual self-making and the epic heroism of the *hero of prophecy*. A common joke amongst players is that many have never finished the game's main questline, despite having played for many hundreds of hours. The player receives the introduction to the world, they see Alduin return, they discover they are the Dragonborn destined to defeat the World-Eater. But then they decide not to go and see the Greybeards to hone their *Thu'um* and instead find a wife, build a home, hunt in the woods and become a vampire. The game essentially runs with two modes that the player may freely switch between. In this mode of play, we seem to eschew heroism. And yet we *are* the hero. Remember that in the construction of the *preordained hero*, the hero is already the HERO from the outset. The heroic deeds are heroic because the hero does them. And so if one ignores the main questline, one

can play as the hero—they still have their *Thu'um*, immense strength, aptitude for magic, and so on—without entering into the hero narrative.

This is different to actually *refusing* the quest, which would allow the great evil to spread unchecked. These two modes of play are able to coexist because time in *Skyrim* is more kairotic than chronologic. Only the player's direct engagement with the quests allows events to progress. This results in a permanent suspension of the heroic quest. The potential is always there, the player need only answer the call and go to meet the Greybeards. But there is no *chronologic* urgency to act. This implementation of time seems odd when examined, but is very familiar to players of roleplaying games. It emphasises the freedom for the player to choose what they want to do and when. It aims to avoid closing any doors for the player as a consequence of their action or inaction. It is their fantasy world, and up to them to decide how they want to interact with it. This is in contrast to a game like *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* (Warhorse Studios, 2018) in which time is more chronologic than kairotic (though not entirely). There, a player may be given a quest which will simply fail and be inaccessible if they do not respond in time, giving instead a sense of the player being a less significant part of a living world which goes on with or without their influence. *Skyrim*'s sense of time, then, gives greater power and primacy to the player, a sort of omnipotence that allows them to plan how, when and in what order they wish to complete quests.

In light of this, we should reconsider the heroic structure of *Skyrim*. The current structure describes only the narration of the main questline which, as we have seen, is by far not the only way to play *Skyrim*. The first three motifs are unavoidable (barring game modification, glitches and so on), and so remain. The final motif, however, is immanent and implicit until it is actualised in gameplay:

- A. ELDER.SCROLLS~AKAVIRI.WISEMEN PROPHESE WORLD-EATER AND LAST.DRAGONBORN
- B. WORLD-EATER.ALDUIN EMERGES
- C. PLAYABLE.FIGURE DISCOVERS THEY=LAST.DRAGONBORN
- [{D. LAST.DRAGONBORN DEFEATS WORLD-EATER.ALDUIN}]

A→B→C→D becomes A→B→C[{→D}]. We know from the decentralised *preordained hero* construction that due to the first three motifs, the hero will defeat the great evil, so this is implied and immanent as soon as those elements are in place. We lose IN:SOVNGARDE from D, however, because that is not a stated part of the prophecy. The suspension of epic heroism is sustained because of this final immanent motif. In fairness, the prophecy never says *when* we will defeat the World-Eater, or that it will happen quickly. But because we know that this is a *preordained hero* construction, its realisation at some future point is never in question. The completion of the narrative arc need only be implied for the heroic construction to work. Refusal of the quest is impossible, only deferral.

## Character select: Your very own Dragonborn

During the game's opening, the player constructs their playable figure. The player first chooses their race before customising gender, hair, face and build.



Figure 7. The *Skyrim* character creation screen with no settings altered. The male, blond Nord is the default Drag-onborn here and is who the player will control if no settings are changed.

These races confer different inherent properties. For example, to take two races central to the Imperial–Stormcloak conflict:

<b>Nord</b>	+10 Two-Handed, +5 Smithing, +5 Block, +5 One-Handed, +5 Light Armor, +5 Speech. <i>Battle Cry</i> : Nearby enemies flee for 30 seconds. <i>Resist Frost</i> : 50% Frost Resistance.
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<b>Imperial</b>	+10 Restoration, +5 Destruction, +5 Enchanting, +5 Heavy Armor, +5 Block, +5 One-Handed. <i>Voice of the Emperor</i> : Calms nearby people for 60 seconds. <i>Imperial Luck</i> : 100% chance of 2–10 extra gold in all chests that normally contain gold, as well as to the corpses of various gold-dropping enemies.
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The Dragonborn can be any of Tamriel’s races, but the premise that race is an objective reality and confers distinct, essentialised traits is made true in the gameworld and cannot be escaped. Whether and to what extent race is socially constructed has long been fiercely debated. Of course, races in *The Elder Scrolls* are fantasy races and do not necessarily correspond to real-world races or ethnicities.<sup>27</sup> The point is that the series chooses to instantiate a reality in which there *are* different races, each with more or less equal personhood, and each with quantifiable, distinct and inherent traits and abilities.

<sup>27</sup> While this is a fair claim for the catlike Khajiit for example, it is more difficult to claim that Nords, who by and large “seem designed to embody the visual trope of the Viking” (V. E. Cooper, 2016, p. 75; see also Hurley, 2019, p. 139), have no basis in a (real or imagined) real-world ethnicity. If Khajiit existed, the debate on race might take on a different tenor.

The player's choice at the beginning of the game then brings to bear all of the game-world-internal mythologies regarding particular races onto the integer LAST.DRAGONBORN in their playthrough. Or, rather, it turns LAST.DRAGONBORN into a decentralised integer that becomes centralised in their own playthrough, like an Eddaic fragment of a wider corpus of Dragonborn-related texts. These integers do not modify the decentralised integer—the Dragonborn is not inherently Khajiit, for example, rather *this* Dragonborn is Khajiit. In this way, the free choice of character creation creates a separation between the instantiated Dragonborn in *this* playthrough versus the mythical figure of the Dragonborn, highlighting what is essential and inescapable and what is interchangeable. The Dragonborn could have been another race, another gender, could have made different alliances and choices, but could not have been other than Dragonborn with the implied heroic motif [D. DRAGONBORN DEFEATS WORLD-EATER.ALDUIN].

## Pick a side! Political choices

Much of this comes down to the underlying conflict between the Empire—the heart of which lies south of Skyrim in Cyrodiil—and the Stormcloaks, which has been noted as the game's "most prominent sub-narrative" (V. E. Cooper, 2016, p. 74). The Stormcloaks believe that Skyrim should secede from the Empire, and in so doing emphasise their differences from their imperial masters in terms of race, geography and religion. The player—regardless of chosen race—may choose to side with either the Imperials or the Stormcloaks. All Stormcloak initiates, including the player if they choose to join, recite an oath:

I do swear my blood and honor to the service of Ulfric Stormcloak...  
 ...Jarl of Windhelm and the true High King of Skyrim.  
 As Talos is my witness, may this oath bind me to death and beyond...  
 ...even to my lord as to my fellow brothers and sisters in arms.  
 All hail the Stormcloaks, the true sons and daughters of Skyrim!

(Bethesda Game Studios, 2011)

"Talos" is a reference to the ninth and newest god of the Nine Divines, and also Dragonborn. His worship is prohibited by the Empire, who recognise only the Eight Divines. But Talos-worship remains prevalent in Skyrim in particular, where they call the hero-king who ascended to godhood "a true son of Skyrim", according to an in-game pamphlet ('Nords Arise!', 2011). So the oath refers to political secession, worship of a prohibited, locally-revered god, and "the true sons and daughters of Skyrim", laying claim to the land itself.

This conflict, which spans either 13 or 14 quests depending on the side taken, is framed from the very beginning of the game, even before the main questline has really been established. The game opens *in media res* with the player in a wagon:

**Ralof** Hey, you. You're finally awake.  
 You were trying to cross the border, right? Walked right into that  
 Imperial ambush, same as us, and that thief over there.  
**Lokir** Damn you Stormcloaks. Skyrim was fine until you came along.  
 Empire was nice and lazy.

If they hadn't been looking for you, I could've stolen that horse and been halfway to Hammerfell.

You there. You and me—we shouldn't be here. It's these Stormcloaks the Empire wants.

**Ralof** We're all brothers and sisters in binds now, thief.

**Lokir** And what's wrong with him, huh?

**Ralof** Watch your tongue. You're speaking to Ulfric Stormcloak, the true High King.

**Lokir** Ulfric? The Jarl of Windhelm? You're the leader of the rebellion.

But if they've captured you... Oh gods, where are they taking us?

**Ralof** I don't know where we're going, but Sovngarde awaits.

**Lokir** No, this can't be happening. This isn't happening.

**Ralof** Hey, what village are you from horse thief?

**Lokir** Why do you care?

**Ralof** A Nord's last thoughts should be of home.

**Lokir** Rorikstead. I'm... I'm from Rorikstead.

(Bethesda Game Studios, 2011)

This unskippable conversation says nothing of the Dragonborn, the prophecy or the player. Rather, the Stormcloak–Imperial conflict is the central topic. Two Nords with opposing political views explain in brief that there is a rebellion instigated by the Stormcloaks, but also show that not all Nords are united in their cause. The player is to be executed by the Imperials alongside the leader of the rebellion. The first quest, ‘Unbound’, sees the execution of the player interrupted by a dragon (who turns out to be Alduin)—the first dragon seen in an age. Amidst the chaos, the prisoners and guards alike try to escape. At some point, the player may choose either to follow the Stormcloak, Ralof, or one of the Imperial guards (who is also a Nord). This choice ultimately has only superficial consequences on the civil war questline, but nonetheless asks the player on some level to make a gut decision on the issue. Depending on who the player follows, they will be asked after the quest to help that faction. Ralof says:

You know, you should go to Windhelm and join the fight to free Skyrim.

You've seen the true face of the Empire here today. If anyone will know what the coming of the dragon means, it's Ulfric. (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011)

While the guard Hadvar says:

It's not easy to go from being executed by the Legion one day to joining up the next. But I think you'll see that the Legion is Skyrim's only hope for real peace right now. I know you'll make the right choice in the end. (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011)

Once the conversation with either Ralof or Hadvar is finished, they leave and the player is left to their own devices. They may choose to not interact with the civil war questline again, though it will be frequently referenced.

This symmetry is carried through the rest of the Civil War questline too. For example, consider the final quests of both. The final quest of the Civil War if the player sides with the Imperials goes as follows:

- A1. DRAGONBORN AND IMPERIALS INVADE WINDHELM
- A2. DRAGONBORN DEFEATS ULFRIC.STORMCLOAK
- A3. DRAGONBORN EXECUTES ULFRIC.STORMCLOAK
- OR → A4. GENERAL.TULLIUS EXECUTES ULFRIC.STORMCLOAK

If the players sides with the Stormcloaks, the quest is instead:

- A1. DRAGONBORN AND STORMCLOAKS INVADE SOLITUDE
- A2. DRAGONBORN DEFEATS GENERAL.TULLIUS
- A3. DRAGONBORN EXECUTES GENERAL.TULLIUS
- OR → A4. ULFRIC.STORMCLOAK EXECUTES GENERAL.TULLIUS

The symmetry of these as a pair constitute in themselves two centralised themes based on the decentralised form:

- A1. DRAGONBORN AND CIVIL.WAR.FACTION INVADE ENEMY.STRONGHOLD
- A2. DRAGONBORN DEFEATS ENEMY.LEADER
- A3. DRAGONBORN EXECUTES ENEMY.LEADER
- OR → A4. FACTION.LEADER EXECUTES ENEMY.LEADER

All four motifs A1–4 are precisely the same whichever side is picked, but with the opposites of each diagrammatic pair (TULLIUS/ULFRIC; SOLITUDE/WINDHELM; IMPERIALS/STORMCLOAKS) placed into each slot. The one thing not in question is again the heroism of the Dragonborn, who is the ultimate driving force and solution in both of these parallel universes. In a world of choice, openness and possibility, it is the mode of heroism that anchors the game, providing its semantic centre.

## Words of power: Magic, language and heroism

We do not tend to think of great heroes as uniquely gifted linguists. Yet, the hero's unique relationship with language is often a defining feature, drawing from and adding to existing mythologies of magical, sacred or powerful languages. Dory in *Finding Nemo* (Stanton, 2003) unusually speaks whale; the Doctor in *Doctor Who* seems to be unique in understanding Baby (Moffat & Hoar, 2011; Roberts & Hughes, 2011); *Arrival* (Villeneuve, 2016) of course centres on a linguist-protagonist; the player in *Outer Wilds* (Mobius Digital, 2019) can only save the galaxy with the help of their new translation tool, allowing them to read vital Nomai writings. Harry Potter, a more directly comparable *hero of prophecy*, is very exceptional for being able to speak Parseltongue intuitively. In some cases, the hero's power is in their ability to use the language, in others to interpret and understand it, in some cases both. In *Skyrim* the Dragonborn's most vital power is their ability to absorb and use *Thu'um*, or Dragon Shouts, one-to-three-word phrases in Dragon language imbued with magic. Most famously, the player early on learns Unrelenting Force, “*Fus Ro Dah*”, “Force, Balance, Push”, a Shout which launches a pulse of force in the direction the player is facing.

The linguistic talents of these heroes can, like heroism itself, come either from themselves or be bestowed on them. Louise Banks in *Arrival*, for example, possesses no innate or divine linguistic gift, but is simply an accomplished linguist whose skills turn out to be crucial. Typically in the *hero of prophecy*, the linguistic gift is innate. Harry Potter has no lessons in Parseltongue and nor *can* one learn the language. It is an innate gift and thereby also a sign of an extraordinary bloodline. Although being able to read and understand Dovahzul, the Dragon language, in *Skyrim* is nothing particularly special, being able to operationalise it as *Thu'um* is an innate gift.

The linguistic exceptionalism of these heroes becomes one of the markers of their exceptionalism in general. Typically, the languages they know or have a unique affinity with are alien, ancient or lost. The hero is not usually someone who, e.g., uniquely speaks Spanish in a community in Denmark, but someone who knows a language which is in some way unknowable, lost, impossible or totally alien. It is a connection with one of the central objects of a mythology, such as dragons in the case of *Skyrim*. Indeed, because of this, the hero's linguistic exceptionalism can also be a cause for suspicion. Harry Potter is ostracised for his xenoglossia when he unknowingly and spontaneously speaks Parseltongue, because Voldemort famously spoke it too. The Dragonborn's use of *Thu'um* marks a fundamental connection with dragons, and therefore with the prophecy's great evil, Anduin, who, as a dragon, can naturally use *Thu'um* also. In this way, the hero's linguistic exceptionalism is also a part of othering the hero. They are revered and championed, but also quite weird and a little scary. They are troublingly linked to the great evil.

*Thu'um* as a crucial constituent of the Dragonborn as a hero also draws from the mythologies of magical languages more generally. R. I. Page writes that many scholars believe that "the Germanic peoples held that the runes were in some way magical, and that each rune either had its own magical power or could cause the release of such power simply by being cut or even named" (1964/1995, p. 105). Although this view was challenged by Page and his contemporaries, and is still challenged now, the mythology remains. One does not need to search far for a game that uses runes as tools for magic.

This spreads beyond runes too. Many alien, ancient or lost languages have become associated with magic. Consider how many systems of magic in fiction (a) use language as the means to conjure, and (b) that language is based on a real-world dead or ancient language. Often, in English-language literature, this is Latin, perhaps because of its traditional association with Christianity and in particular Catholicism, used to evoke religious power without many in the congregation being able to understand it. But in various cases Old English, Old Norse, Hebrew, Ancient Greek, Celtic languages and so on have also been used, as well as entirely fictional languages that nonetheless are in some way based on these languages. Dragon language in *Skyrim* most closely resembles cuneiform script in writing (though presumably carved by dragons' claws), English in its grammar, and North Germanic languages in its phonetics. As such, it follows the examples above in being a language which can have magical properties in itself, and which is in various ways rendered alien to the common tongue of the gameworld, as well as retaining a sense of ancientness. The alienness of languages-as-magic marks their exceptionalism, while their ancientness serves to decontextualise or precontextualise it, strongly signalling that the magic of the language goes far beyond

the contingencies of the current context—deeper, older, more mysterious, and thus similar to the prophecy of adversary and hero.

The mythology of language-as-magical is made fact in *Skyrim*. Of course, with *Skyrim* we're not talking about vague hexes and curses and spells whose efficacy is subject to faith in their being the cause of whatever outcome occurred. In *Skyrim*, the player presses a button, the player-character shouts “*fus!*” and a pulse of energy shoots ahead, knocking enemies back. The *Thu'um*, or Words of Power, are literally words of power. In this way also, within the gameworld the Dragonborn's exceptional, divine abilities are not a matter of faith but of cold reality. This linguistic ability also goes some way to prove the prophecy, because an innate affinity with *Thu'um* is associated with the Dragonborn. In this way, the mythology of language as instantiated in *Skyrim* also helps to solidify the prophecy as basic, uncontested fact, rather than many other similar prophecies where debate surrounding them becomes a central feature of the fictional world. For example, in George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1996–2011), there are three major implied *preordained heroes*: the Prince That Was Promised, Azor Ahai, and the Stallion Who Mounts the World, each emerging from a different part of the world. Even within the communities from which these prophecies emerge, however, there is no certainty regarding what precisely the prophecy means or to whom it refers. For example, much is made of the fact that the Promised Prince prophecy was actually written in the gender-neutral language, High Valyrian in *A Feast for Crows* (2005), and so “Prince” may be a mistranslation. There is no such debate or uncertainty in *Skyrim*, even between the two warring factions, evidenced by the Dragonborn's undeniable, inherent powers such as *Thu'um*.

## Scandinavian *Skyrim*: Neomedievalism and neo-Norse influence

*Skyrim*, the eponymous region in which the game is set, is the northernmost region of the continent Tamriel (**Error! Reference source not found.**). That the design of *Skyrim* is influence by Norse mythology is an understatement. From the naming conventions to the landscapes to the local folklore, the region is steeped in Norse influence. It is home of the Nords, “a tall and fair-haired people” (Bethesda Game Studios, 2011) who, according to Mary Kate Hurley, “are clearly meant to be ciphers for the Vikings” (2019, p. 139). To cover in detail the extent of Norse influence is infeasible (see instead V. E. Cooper, 2016; de Byl, 2019; Melnic, 2018; Muschler, 2014; Panaro, 2019). In this section, I instead try to consider to what end Norse mythology and folklore are being used in *Skyrim*. And, further, to link this back to the lens of heroism.

In the previous section, I discuss the essentialising power that race has in the gameworld and the centrality of the Imperial–Stormcloak conflict, both working to put into sharp relief a fundamental difference between *Skyrim* and other regions of Tamriel. Even if one has not played another *Elder Scrolls* game (each set in a different region of Tamriel), one gets a strong sense of a unique *Skyrim* identity, one which is contested and which many are fiercely proud of, integrating it into their own identities. This stark difference is also emphasised in the fact

that while the Imperials and Cyrodiil are modelled on Roman culture and society, the Nords and Skyrim have clear Norse, Nordic and Scandinavian influence (V. E. Cooper, 2016, p. 99).



Figure 8. A map of the continent of Tamriel. Skyrim is in the centre to the north.

An example is the draugr, “undead Nordic warriors of Skyrim … among the most common foes in Skyrim’s many crypts and catacombs” (‘Draugr (Skyrim)’, 2022). This takes clear inspiration from the Old Norse *draugr*, spirits (*draugr* is usually translated into English as ‘ghost’) who rise from their burial mound and continue to pose a threat to the living (Simek, 1993/2007, p. 65). However, Ármann Jakobsson (2011, p. 282) cautions against easy assumptions that modern concepts are automatically related to old or ancient ones simply because the same word is used. Penny de Byl (2019, p. 58), drawing on Jakobsson’s framework, argues that in many ways *Skyrim*’s draugr owe more to modern mythologies of zombies than to Old Norse or medieval Icelandic *draugr* (see Shaviro, 1993 for the modern mythology of zombies; and Backe & Aarseth, 2013 for zombieism in digital games). De Byl ultimately concludes with a more nuanced picture: while the *Skyrim* draugr does diverge from the *draugr* in notable ways, the tradition is also in other ways better preserved than in other arenas, like modern Icelandic literature (2019, p. 69). This can be seen in characteristic partials like PROTECTS BURIAL.SITE shared between draugr and *draugr*, even if the *Skyrim* draugr are somewhat zombified in their deindividualisation and algorithmic mindlessness.

The draugr here is characteristic of the mode of folkloric transfer in *Skyrim* (and many modern works besides): certain key elements are maintained, but the concept is adapted both for the present mythic landscape and for the medium’s specificities, affordances and

limitations. For example, Tanya Krzywinska describes zombies as an excellent match for digital games: “game zombies provide the ideal enemy: they are strong, relentless, and already dead; they look spectacularly horrific; and they invite the player to blow them away without guilt or second thought” (2008, p. 153). Furthermore, being mindless provides a ready-made diegetic grounding for that algorithmic behaviour that is necessitated by the computational nature of games. While Backe and Aarseth do note that “games can largely forego the ‘ideal enemy’ scenario” (2013, p. 13), referencing Krzywinska, *Skyrim*’s draugr do seem to fulfil this role. As de Byl explains:

The player is confronted with the undead as an obstacle to their progression in the game, and they are treated like any barrier as something to be defeated, not understood. The deindividualisation of the draugr, as is the case with zombies, provides the ideal threat to challenge the player, removing any ethical dilemmas involved in their disposal. (2019, p. 58)

De Byl’s examination of the draugr demonstrates this mode of folkloric transfer whereby a particular integer is most outwardly referenced—DRAUGR—but the appending of partials and the constellation of motifs and themes that that integer appears in is changed compared with DRAUGR as it appears in, for example, medieval Icelandic Eddaic literature. It is not simply DRAUGR as a mask, behind which is ZOMBIE, but an amalgamation of the two and more.

Likewise, dragons unsurprisingly feature prominently in *Skyrim*. While it is a well-known, unexplained curiosity that dragons are “a global phenomenon” in ancient folklores (Arnold, 2018, p. 7) (notwithstanding a Jakobssonian wariness of conflating all these folkloric creatures under one term), *Skyrim* is clearly inspired more by Celtic and Germanic dragons than by Chinese dragons, for example. Certain motifs are clear. For example, the notion of the dragon as an “omen of disaster was widespread” in Old Norse and Old English sources (Arnold, 2018, p. 77), and the reappearance of Alduin in *Skyrim* is likewise taken to be a dark portent. Martin Arnold also notes that “the Germanic dragon often appears to have a lot in common with the undead (Old Norse *draugr*) … in terms of harrowing behaviours, arcane wisdom and remote barrows”, typically located in dramatic places like a high headland overlooking the ocean (2018, pp. 116–117). This too reminds one of *Skyrim*’s dragons. They have a terrifying power as they are among the strongest enemies in the game combat-wise. They have arcane wisdom in the form of *Thu’um*. And they are usually solitary creatures, found in remote, often high-up locations like the Ancient’s Ascent or Northwind Summit lairs.

In terms of heroism, HERO SLAYS DRAGON is a common motif also in Germanic folklore. For example, THOR SLAYS MIDGARDSORMR (if we consider the Midgard Serpent a dragon, as in Arnold, 2018, p. 82), BEOWULF SLAYS DRAGON, SIGURD SLAYS FÁFNIR or, emblematically (literally) for the English, GEORGE SLAYS DRAGON. HERO SLAYS DRAGON occurs also in Indo-European folklore more broadly, but taken together with the other indicators, it seems clear that *Skyrim* is invoking a primarily Germanic dragon. Perhaps more specifically a Tolkienesque dragon. Fantasy games like *Skyrim* are built on a videogame heritage heavily influenced by *Dungeons & Dragons*, which was heavily influenced by Tolkien’s works—so much so that “the creators faced a lawsuit from the Tolkien estate, forcing them to change the names of multiple types of characters” (Vossen, 2020, p. 43). Tolkien was himself most strongly

influenced by dragons of Germanic tradition, especially Fáfnir and the *Beowulf* dragon (Arnold, 2018, pp. 226–235; Berman, 1984; Stein, 1968; Tolkien, 1936/1963, 1947/2008, p. 55).

Draugr and dragons are, of course, monsters and not heroes. But alongside the architecture, naming conventions and countless other signifiers, we are provided with an arena and a context for our heroism as the Dragonborn that is firmly rooted in North Germanic traditions. Marc R. Muschler (2014) observes both that the monsters fall into this tradition, as I have also shown, but also that the mode of heroism is deeply tied up with this. He notes that “there is a general association between the best of heroes and the ability to slay a dragon that distinguishes them within the canon” (2014, p. 85).

Amidst this Norse influence is a complicating factor. *Skyrim* as a region is both decidedly neo-Norse and presented as distinct from and threatened by the Empire. Both of these elements are important in the game’s invocation of Scandinavian mythologies. Indeed, it is the combination of these as the “American/Medieval” (2019, p. 157) that Hurley describes as being central. Hurley (2019, pp. 157–158) draws on Huizinga (1938/2014) to argue that the game’s fantastical neomedievalism enables it to draw sharper lines between experiences like good and bad, sadness and joy, which all seem exaggerated in works such as these. There is greater evil, greater heroism, and the prophecy draws a firm line between them. At the same time, however, on the American side of Hurley’s combination, there is the complexity of indigeneity that is raised constantly by the game in the foregrounding of the Imperial-Stormcloak conflict. The Nords claim *Skyrim* as their own, but Hurley (2019, p. 157) notes that this constructed sense of indigeneity is undermined even as it is constructed by, for example, the discovery of the Forsworn and the Dwemer, who both harbour claims to indigeneity. In the combination of these two aspects, then, we have a world that appears on first glance to be simplistically fantastical, drawing on well-established neomedieval constructions, but which has a deeper complexity that is hinted at during the game’s opening and which can then be explored in an open way.

But even though constituting the American side of Hurley’s combination, the claims of indigeneity are still made by the Nords in *Skyrim*, clearly influenced by medieval Scandinavians and particularly Vikings. This particular combination has been analysed by Kristian A. Bjørkelo (2020) with reference to white nationalism. The phrase, “*Skyrim* belongs to the Nords!” is already a nationalism tied to a white race: this country belongs to this race. Bjørkelo observes:

It is not a far reach for the White Nationalists to identify themselves with the Stormcloaks and the Nords, or their struggle against the Septim Empire—a multicultural institution, that unite [sic] people of all races and creeds. ... The land of *Skyrim* is portrayed as a contested space, as the Stormcloak rebellion and the ethnic conflict is frequently referenced and pressed upon the player by the NPCs in the game. (2020)

Bjørkelo does not argue that *Skyrim* is a white nationalist game by dint of this. He employs Stuart Hall’s (1973/2018) encoding/decoding model to paint a nuanced picture whereby a white nationalist decoding of the game is absolutely possible and afforded by the game, but that the game’s encoding does not prescribe or necessarily champion that decoding. This

taps into the broader mythological cycle of Norse folklore, whereby over the last century in particular Norse motifs and symbols have been adopted by far-right, fascist and ethnonationalist groups—most notably of course the Nazis.

The use of Scandinavian folklores combined with questions of ethnonationalism and indigeneity make for a politically complicated context in *Skyrim*—as evidenced by the meandering path of this section. This is perhaps precisely what makes *Skyrim* a compelling heroic environment. Almost all scholars who analyse *Skyrim* find themselves discussing the game’s openworldness, often foregrounding it (e.g., Bjørkelo, 2020; V. E. Cooper, 2016; Hurley, 2019; Melnic, 2018). In a politically complicated environment, heroism may feel more like the player’s own, because they are themselves taking up the cause they deem fit. Because the Imperial–Stormcloak conflict is ultimately optional, this cause is always undertaken by choice on top of the prophetic heroism of the main questline, in this way offering the player multiple forms of heroism they may enter into: one inherent and essential, the other a more self-sacrificial championing of a chosen cause. Both, however, are given a distinctly neo-Norse flavour.

The fraught question of indigeneity in *Skyrim* as well as its Norse influence seems confused, but makes sense in light of Umberto Eco’s (1986) arguments about neomedievalism. Asking why the contemporary US seemed to have a new-found fascination with the Middle Ages, Eco argues that “the Middle Ages are the root of all our contemporary ‘hot’ problems”, such as the governance of markets, technology, labour, productivity, the modern nation state, modern armies, and so on (1986, p. 65). Because of this, “looking at the Middle Ages means looking at our infancy … Our return to the Middle Ages is a quest for our roots” (1986, p. 65). The Middle Ages are imagined in many different ways—Eco outlines ten Middle Ages that we dream of. Often, neo-Norse depictions and reconstructions are seen as “the Middle Ages as a *barbaric* age, a land of elementary and outlaw feelings” (1986, p. 69). Drawing on Eco in an analysis of a reconstruction of an old Norse game, Leon Wild (2012) makes an argument similar to the one that Hurley makes via Huizinga:

The appeal of early medievalism in a popular setting is also the appeal of an age that seems to be more heroic, when life was more dangerous and hence interesting, and … where the fates of the people hang in balance and only super-human efforts are able to bring about resolution. (2012, p. 191)

Certainly this rings true of *Skyrim*. But *Skyrim*’s neomedievalism is also strangely the “Middle Ages of *national identities* … opposed to the miseries of national enslavement and foreign domination” (1986, p. 70). Clearly, this is also a strong theme in *Skyrim*. The combination characterises Hurley’s American/Medieval combination and can find coherence in the particularly North American relationship to the Vikings. Karl Steel describes the “heritage function of Vikings in America” (2018, p. 76). Because the Vikings came to North America but left again, Steel argues that white Americans can use this as an origin for white victimhood. The American context allows them to both draw on the noble barbarity of Vikings<sup>28</sup> as well

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<sup>28</sup> Ironically so. As Steel argues (2018, p. 86), Vikings did not think of themselves as barbaric and brutish—their Christian and Muslim enemies and trading partners did.

as narratives of embattlement, besiegement and oppression as related to a subjugated ethnonationalist state.

The discussion of Scandinavian, neo-Norse, neomedieval mythologies in *Skyrim* is complex because it taps into somewhat contradictory mythologies. It draws on North America's contested mythic past—Steel's (2018, p. 75) opening sentence is telling of this, quoting a Newfoundland tourist brochure that describes the Canadian region as the cradle of white civilisation in North America. It also draws on mythologies of European pasts, including the Vikings and the Romans, who in history did not overlap (excepting the Eastern Roman Empire, usually distinguished from the Western Roman Empire which fell in 476 CE). Neomedievalism and specifically neo-Norse mythologies are employed in service of this central question of indigeneity and the besiegement of an ethnonationalist state. But, ultimately, there is enough ambiguity and space for choice left within that to allow the player to reconfigure *Skyrim*'s particular mythological constellation of these, whether that be the noble defence of an indigenous Nordic *Skyrim* against the tyranny of alien invaders, or the multicultural Empire's subjugation of a backwards, racist people. It is important that the picture painted of Nords in *Skyrim* is fraught with inconsistencies raised by the Falmer and the Dwemer, for example, and that the Stormcloaks are not always glorified and valorised, and that so too is the Empire's multiculturalism tempered by brutal methods and imperial occupation. These internal inconsistencies and conflicts inject the ambiguity necessary for the player to be able to make a genuine choice in how they want to arrange this constellation into the myth of *Skyrim* they want to make reality.

This can be made sense of in mythic discourse terms because the integers, motifs and themes present in *Skyrim* are read in the context of meaningful integers, motifs and themes of the player's own communities. For white nationalists, STORMCLOAKS REBEL AGAINST:EMPIRE may resonate with a motif of their own along the lines of WHITE.PEOPLE REBEL AGAINST:GLOBAL LIBERALISM~CULTURAL MARXISTS~MULTICULTURALISTS. This motif is no doubt as evil as it is incorrect, but it has purchase within communities like Stormfront. When a motif in *Skyrim* is structurally similar, this can then be equated and aligned in their minds. How motifs like these can be seen to resonate together is of course very flexible, but not totally free. As Bjørkelo suggests, the game must have encoded in it for decodings like that to be possible, plausible and persuasive. The ability for the player to actuate different themes and motifs and configurations thereof through choice and play in *Skyrim*'s open world means that there can be found a wider range of these mythic resonances with players' own mythic environments.

## Discussion

*Skyrim* proves a fruitful example of large, openworld roleplaying games and their relationship to heroism, which must grapple with the inevitability and inherency of fantastical, prophetic heroism, but also the openendedness, rhizotomy and free choice of the openworld structure. Chiefly, the game establishes the player as the Dragonborn. The Dragonborn is a *preordained hero*. Their heroism is inherent and already assured. However, DRAGONBORN as

a decentralised mythic integer is centralised *only* through play. The core motifs and themes involving DRAGONBORN are the following. First, there is the prophecy:

- A. ELDER.SCROLLS~AKAVIRI.WISEMEN PROPHESE WORLD-EATER AND LAST.DRAGONBORN
- B. WORLD-EATER.ALDUIN EMERGES
- C. PLAYABLE.FIGURE DISCOVERS THEY=LAST.DRAGONBORN
- [{D. LAST.DRAGONBORN DEFEATS WORLD-EATER.ALDUIN}]

There is a great evil in the world and the player is aware that they, as the Dragonborn, are the one who will defeat it. But, crucially, the actualised defeat of Alduin is left immanent during play until the player completes that final quest. A limited number of fixed motifs also accompany DRAGONBORN:

DRAGONBORN USES VOICE~THU'UM

And:

DRAGONBORN SLAYS DRAGON  
→ DRAGONBORN ABSORBS DRAGON.SOUL[=DRAGON.KNOWLEDGE&POWER]

Beyond these motifs, however, little about DRAGONBORN is fixed, but is rather centralised by each player in their own game. The Dragonborn can be of any race or gender, of any physical appearance, can specialise in any form of combat (or even none in a ‘pacifist’ play-through). They can join almost any faction, even ones which oppose one another, such as the Stormcloaks and the Imperials. A remarkable amount of the Dragonborn’s person is entirely unspecified. This both emphasises the inherency of their heroism by showing that *it does not matter* who they are or what they do, they *are* the Dragonborn, but also allows for the player to layer other heroisms on top (or not, as Melnic’s analysis shows). We may therefore see events such as the symmetrical Civil War questlines in which that stable heroism can be put to different causes. The Civil War is most prominent, but many of the game’s questlines have this kind of symmetry, whereby a decentralised form of the quest can be centralised in diametrically opposed ways. This gives a greater sense that the heroism one chooses for oneself is a real choice. Compare this with systems such as *Mass Effect*’s (BioWare, 2007) paragon/renegade dichotomy, where the core events of questlines remain unchanged, but one can choose compassionate and selfless actions (paragon) or apathetic and ruthless ones (renegade). The course of events does not change, just the way in which the hero approaches them. *Skyrim* is the opposite: events happen in the same *way*, but different *events* happen based on player choices.

As mentioned, this happens throughout most of the game’s sidequests. Choices branch into parallel paths to different ends. Each faction—such as the Thieves Guild or the College of Winterhold—is beset by the political machinations of internal factions characterised by intractable oppositions. It’s politics all the way down. These conflicts are shown to be inevitable and eternal. The presence of the Dragonborn renders these into Gordian knots. No matter which side the player chooses or which choices they make, the Dragonborn’s involvement in the questline invariably solves these political clashes and brings each party to a

compromise (or causes one party to win outright). While politics is shown to be omnipresent and unsolvable, the precontingent, precontextual heroism of the Dragonborn is a force which cuts through that.

This means that the *mode* of heroism in *Skyrim* is remarkably stable, but the *cause* of that heroism is different. The symmetry here then tells us something crucial about the construction of heroism in *Skyrim*: it is not contingent. The course of events, the people involved, the foes faced, the causes championed, none of these change the mode of heroism in the game. This suggests a heroism that is internal, inherent and, in true mythic fashion, exists outside of contingent context. The player as an external force acting within the gameworld in this way parallels a spirit of heroism that the Dragonborn is tied to through lineage. Neither are contingent on the current context of *Skyrim*, but predate it, able to shape it by radically changing events.

## 5.7 Assassin's Creed

*Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2007, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2020; Ubisoft Quebec, 2015; Ubisoft Québec, 2018; Ubisoft Sofia, 2014) is an alternate history science fiction series beginning in 2007 with *Assassin's Creed* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2007). The series' initial success turned what was intended to be a trilogy into a franchise with almost yearly instalments and many spin-offs, including games, films and novels. Across the series, the player meets some of the most impactful people in history, including Karl Marx, Leonardo da Vinci, Socrates, Blackbeard, and even gods such as Odin, Zeus and Horus. The player witnesses well-known events like the American revolution, the Peloponnesian War and the Viking invasion of Britain. The red thread between all of these time periods, characters and events is an ongoing battle throughout history between two secret societies, the Assassins and the Templars, who turn out to be behind almost every major historical event, fighting over mind-controlling artefacts called Pieces of Eden. Each game is framed by a modern setting in which a modern-day Assassin uses a device called the Animus to relive their genetic memories, accessing their genetic ancestors' lives. This is done in order to track down the Pieces of Eden, objects that wield great power and which could be used to control humanity if the Templars came into possession of them. The historical protagonist is the focus of each game, linked to a number of modern protagonists in an overarching plot. Similarly to *Call of Duty*, there are a number of different subseries in *Assassin's Creed*, although they are all part of the same storyworld. The core series (excluding spinoffs) may be divided in two ways: by the historical or modern protagonist (Table 6).

The series begins with Altaïr, Ezio, Connor and the modern-day protagonist Desmond, revolving around a 2012 apocalypse prophecy that Desmond ultimately averts by sacrificing himself. Altaïr was born into an Assassin family during the Third Crusades, growing up to become a skilled Assassin himself. Over the course of the game, Altaïr kills a number of key Templars before eventually facing off against his old mentor, Al Mualim, who betrayed the Assassins. Altaïr kills Al Mualim, succeeds him as head of the order and secures the Apple of Eden. Ezio was born in Florence to a noble family, but soon finds himself caught up in a wider plot in which his family is killed in front of him. Seeking revenge, Ezio joins the Assassins. His quest eventually leads him to Rodrigo Borgia, Pope Alexander VI, who is a Templar seeking the Apple of Eden. Ratonhnhaké:ton, or Connor, was born to a Templar father and Native American mother. He joins the Assassins in order to stop the Templars, aligned with the British in the Revolutionary War, from destroying his village. The Desmond trilogy ends in the modern era with Desmond sacrificing himself in order to prevent a massive solar flare, but unleashing new dangers into the world as well.

The following games from IV to *Syndicate* place less emphasis on the modern framing story, featuring unnamed protagonists and much less in the way of interconnected events. Instead, the Assassin–Templar war continues, fought both in the present and aided by information gleaned in the past via the Animus.

*Origins*, *Odyssey* and *Valhalla* feature a new, named modern-day protagonist and overarching plot and are considered something of a reboot for the series. All set before any other game in the series, these three focus on Layla Hassan's genetic ancestors, who all predate

the Assassin and Templar orders. They focus instead on the precursor organisations, the Hidden Ones and the Order of the Ancients, respectively. The modern-day framing narrative ends with Layla sacrificing herself to become the Reader, a being of light performing calculations in an attempt to find a solution to another upcoming catastrophe.

Game	Historical setting	Historical	Modern
<i>Assassin's Creed</i>	Holy Land, 1191	Altair Ibn-La'Ahad	Desmond Miles
<i>II</i>	Italy, 1479–1499	Ezio Auditore da Firenze	
<i>Brotherhood</i>	Italy, 1500–1507		
<i>Revelations</i>	Constantinople, 1511 and Masyaf, 1189–1257	Ezio and Altair	
<i>III</i>	North America, 1754–1755	Ratonhnaké:ton/Connor	Abstergo research analyst (Desmond's memories)
<i>IV</i>	West Indies, 1715–1722	Edward Kenway	
<i>Rogue</i>	North America, 1752–1760	Shay Patrick Cormac	
<i>Unity</i>	Paris, 1789–1794	Arno Dorian	The Helix Initiate
<i>Syndicate</i>	London, 1868	Jacob and Evie Frye	
<i>Origins</i>	Egypt, 49–43 BCE	Bayek of Siwa	
<i>Odyssey</i>	Greece, 431–422 BCE	Kassandra or Alexios	Layla Hassan
<i>Valhalla</i>	Norway and British Isles, 872–878	Eivor	

Table 6. Table showing each game's historical setting and their historical and modern-day protagonists.

Allohistorical speculative fiction is a relatively new genre, beginning in earnest in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and only gaining prominence in the latter half of the 20th century along with the rise of science fiction (Rosenfeld, 2002, pp. 91–92). (As a broader phenomenon, allohistorical speculation has unsurprisingly been going on for much longer.) Historian Gavriel Rosenfeld (2002) attributes the rise of the genre to a move away from deterministic thinking in a number of fields. This includes chaos theory in science, the so-called “end of history” (Fukuyama, 1992) in the post-Cold War period discrediting deterministic ideologies,<sup>29</sup> post-modernism challenging hegemonic grand narratives and authorities of truth, and digital technology “liberating human beings from the constraints of real space and time through cyberspace and virtual reality” (2002, p. 92). Each of these elements, Rosenfeld argues, causes us to consider that things *could have gone differently* and to therefore engage in allohistorical

<sup>29</sup> Though this is in itself a deterministic ideology, one which has been largely discredited in the post-9/11, post-2008 world in which history very much appears to be happening (Hochuli et al., 2021). Fukuyama, however, remains resolute as of now (see Fukuyama, 2022).

speculation. Despite this, Rosenfeld claims that “alternate history is inherently presentist. It explores the past less for its own sake than to utilize it instrumentally to comment upon the present” (2002, p. 93). Why do we speculate on how things could have been different? And why do we speculate on the things we speculate on? To compare it to our present, either favourably or unfavourably. Rosenfeld (2002, p. 93) sketches two forms of alternate history: fantasy scenarios and nightmare scenarios. We are either considering how things could have gone worse—reflecting favourably on the present—or how they could have gone better.

This account of aliohistory does not quite seem to fit with *Assassin’s Creed*, however. In *Assassin’s Creed*, the broad historical events depicted do not have different outcomes than they did. We are not asking in *Assassin’s Creed III*, ‘what if the United States lost the Revolutionary War?’. In *Valhalla* as in real life the Vikings successfully conquer much of Britain. Instead, *Assassin’s Creed*’s mode of aliohistorical thinking is more a ‘yes, and...’ approach. ‘Yes, the Allies won World War II, and did you know that Hitler was actually a Templar puppet and the war was really a smaller part of an even larger objective?’. This places *Assassin’s Creed* more properly within the realm of conspiracy than alternate history. Not ‘what if things had gone differently?’, but ‘what if there is *more* to this?’. Lars de Wildt observes that the series moves from one mode of conspiracy to another:

ASSASSIN’S CREED enacts two aesthetics of conspiracy: a modernist and a post-modernist one. First, its premise and early iterations present a modernist conspiracy: one that fears an enemy from ‘without,’ against which a utopian project must be leveraged to protect ourselves against it—such as a foreign invasion of Templar Crusaders. Secondly, it moves toward a postmodern aesthetics of conspiracy, which places the enemy ‘within’ our own society and history, whose ‘topos’ of Utopia overlaps with our dystopia, and vice versa. In other words, the ‘not-place’ of Utopia is increasingly mapped over every-place, to be found all around us, if only we learn to unveil its conspiratorial hiddenness. (2019, p. 177)

Considering the series as conspiracy more than aliohistory should be legible in its mythology. We might expect certain notions of (un)truth, (mis)trust and paranoia to be mythologised, if what we are centrally concerned with is ‘the truth’—no, not *that* truth, the *real* truth. Like a conspiracy theorist, Desmond and the other modern-day protagonists (and with them, the player), are privy to what ‘really happened’ via the Animus. In terms of heroism, we would therefore expect the *hero-sceptic* to come to the fore, the fearless seeker of truth.

## True sight: The user interface and truth

One of the most striking features of the games, and one of the red threads that link all time periods and protagonists, is ‘Eagle Vision’. This is alternatively called Odin’s Sight, Eagle Sense, Knowledge or, more generically, a ‘gift’. It is an innate extra sense that all protagonists have that allows them to see what others cannot. In gameplay, this is typically a toggled state in which time slows down and the player sees the world differently. For example, activating Eagle Vision in the first game highlights the playable figure Altaïr’s target in gold, other

enemies in red, and allows civilians to blend into the monochromatised background. It also allows the player to see hidden images and messages. For example, in *Revelations* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2011), playable figure Ezio is able to activate Eagle Vision to see a hidden world map (depicted as a Mercator projection, developed after Ezio's time). This map makes no sense to Ezio himself, but does to Desmond, laying the groundwork for the events of *III* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2012). In *Fate of Atlantis* (Ubisoft Québec, 2019), an expansion to *Odyssey*, this sense is revealed to be a genetic trait, the result of interbreeding between humans and the Isu (an ancient, highly-advanced humanoid species, almost entirely wiped out before human civilisation began on Earth).

This links into the notion of the gameworld as a simulation on two levels. One, the level of gameworlds as such as simulations. Two, the diegetic representation of the Animus as producing a simulation. These two levels of simulation work together with the Eagle Vision in particular. The two are made to overlap by the overlapping UI. That is, although the UI is represented as a diegetic part of the Animus, it is actually targeted towards the player. The discrepancy between the two is revealed when the playable figure leaves the Animus and the player still controls them and many of the UI elements remain. The user interface in *Assassin's Creed* thus works on at least three entities at once: the modern-day protagonist, their genetic ancestor the player plays as via the Animus, and the player themselves. The representation of a diegetic user interface and its blurring with the 'actual' user interface deserves closer analysis.

Historian of technology Branden Hookway (2014) describes the interface in general as "a liminal or threshold condition that both delimits the space for a kind of inhabitation and opens up otherwise unavailable phenomena, conditions, situations, and territories for exploration, use, participation, and exploitation" (2014, p. 5). *Assassin's Creed*'s Eagle Vision certainly seems to work in this way, opening up both vital components of the games' plots and facilitating some of the games' core gameplay. Eagle Vision delimits a space "within which a specific set of relations may occur" (Hookway, 2014, p. 17). Hookway notes a strange dualism in the interface. It "brings forth a multiplicity: both in the separation it defines and polices between human and machine and in the augmentation that is at once human and machine" (2014, p. 39). In other words, the interface is something which at once tries to bring the two interfaced entities together (player and game system, for example), but also in its existence demonstrates the difference and separateness of the two. Alexander R. Galloway notes this tension too, observing that "there are two layers at play here that would seem to contradict and disable each other" (2006, p. 37) in the first-person shooter:

The first is the full volume of the world, extending in three dimensions, varied, spatial, and textured. The second is the HUD, which exists in a flat plane and is overlayed on top of the first world. This second layer benefits from none of the richness, dynamic motion, or narrative illusion of the first layer (a few notable counterexamples like *Metroid Prime* notwithstanding). ... The HUD exists as a supplement to the rendered world. It completes it, but only through a process of exteriority that is unable again to penetrate its core. (2006, p. 37)

The counterexample of *Metroid Prime* (Retro Studios & Nintendo, 2002) that Galloway raises is an early example of what has since become a popular game design strategy: hiding the HUD or integrating it within the diegetic gameworld. While not the first game to do this, *Dead Space* (EA Redwood Shores, 2008) is often credited for setting off the trend in earnest due to the centrality of the diegetic HUD strategy in both development and marketing (Tach, 2013). In these cases, the stated goal is almost always *immersion*. “The developers at Visceral [formerly EA Redwood Shores] carried the diegetic design philosophy throughout the objects in the series, and the idea began with a desire to foster a sense of immersion” (Tach, 2013). If the connecting impetus of the interface can be preserved while masking as much as possible its separating impetus, then player and game are brought in some sense closer together and ‘immersion’ is fostered.<sup>30</sup>

*Assassin’s Creed* stands as a curious example in this respect, because although the Animus makes diegetic justification for almost any HUD straightforward, it still sticks out, intentionally so. The interface is still separating and alienating, even though it is a part of the diegetic gameworld. Even death in the series is a part of this interface, whereby the genetic ancestor protagonist is ‘desynchronized’ rather than killed. *Assassin’s Creed* makes an explicit HUD a part of its gameworld because it reinforces the idea that there are multiple layers to reality and truth that must be peeled away to access the ‘real’ truth. By showing interfaces which reveal different things and show the world in a different light, the conspiratorial aesthetic is reinforced. There is *more* to reality and *more* to the truth *everywhere*, you just cannot see it (without the right interface). Eagle Vision, rendered as part of an interface, is in this way linked to the series’ conspiratorial aesthetic.

#### PLAYER SEES:TRUTH WITH:EAGLE.VISION

Note that the truth here is found *with* the use of some transhuman ability/interface. The fact that Eagle Vision is an innate property of the hero (linking to the notion *preordained hero*—I explore this dynamic later) blurs these boundaries between human, interface and world. Accessing the ‘real’ world, the ‘real’ truth relies on both human and interface as an interlocked being. This is only emphasised by the ‘Bleeding Effect’, an Animus-induced disorder whereby the user’s genetic memories begin to blur and merge with the user’s own. This both has the effect of breaking down the link between user, interface and interfaced object, and causing some of those interfaces to ‘bleed’ into the user’s real world. The Animus user begins to see their ‘real’ world through Animus-like interfaces and finds that they have absorbed abilities (such as fighting) from their genetic ancestor. The fact that Eagle Vision is an indistinguishable mix of interface and innate ability speaks to the broader treatment of interfaces in the series. Recall that the hidden world map described earlier makes no sense to Ezio. Eagle Vision as an innate ability on its own is not sufficient.

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<sup>30</sup> Immersion is a slippery term that I will not engage with too deeply here (see instead Calleja, 2011, 2014 as an important starting point for immersion in digital games). There is also research regarding interfaces, heads-up displays (HUDs) and immersion, including empirical studies on the impact of removing the HUD or integrating it into the gameworld (Caroux & Isbister, 2016; Iacovides et al., 2015; Peacocke et al., 2015, 2018) and more theoretical considerations of the role of UIs and HUDs in immersion in games (K. Jørgensen, 2013; Schäbler, 2015).

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A1. EZIO SEES:MAP WITH:EAGLE.VISION
A2. EZIO DOES NOT UNDERSTAND MAP
B1. DESMOND SEES:EZIO THROUGH:ANIMUS
    → B2. DESMOND&PLAYER UNDERSTAND TRUTH

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Both transhuman *abilities* and layers of *interfaces* must merge within a cyborg hero to see the truth behind the truth. This cyborg entwinement and the layers of mediation and technology support a conspiratorial world in which one must always suspect the world they see as incomplete or in some way deceptive.

## Unsung heroes

Despite all the legendary figures of history depicted in *Assassin's Creed*, it is notable that the playable figure is always unknown. We might recognise from history Robert de Sablé, Grand Master of the Knights Templar, in the first game, but not Altaïr Ibn-La'Ahad, who we play as. We might recognise Pope Alexander IV in *Assassin's Creed II*, but not Ezio Auditore da Firenze. In *Valhalla*, we meet the familiar figures of the sons of Ragnar Lodbrok, but we will not already be familiar with Eivor Varinsdottir.<sup>31</sup> And yet it is these playable figures who prove to be the most impactful. A crucial part of the *Assassin's Creed* series allohistorical account is the *unsung hero*. The 'true' hero is someone who was previously lost to history. In *Valhalla*, we have the Viking invasion of Britain, the sons of Ragnar, the various kings of the heptarchy, but we have missed the 'real' hero of these momentous events. The playable figures of the series, then, are not only the lens through which we uncover crucial missing information throughout history, but they are a part of that missing information itself. To each playable figure we can attach UNSUNG as a partial, knowing that each of our heroes will not be properly recognised by future generations. We know this because of the framing narrative: a person from our present uses the Animus to access their genetic memories.

This has a number of implications. First, the way we uncover these unsung heroes is through the Animus, which provides the user access in virtual reality to their genetic memories. I go into more depth on the implications of genetic memory in the next subsection, but here the salient part is that we use *science* and *technology* to uncover unsung heroes. It is not by a careful reappraisal of the past that we uncover unsung heroes, nor through religious revelation or the like. It is by scientific and technological advancement. This reinforces the notion within the conspiratorial mode of the game that only through rationalism and science can we access the *real* truth. Second, there is a predetermination to the game whereby we can prefigure the playable figure as hero, not only because we are playing as them (which already goes some way to prefiguring them as heroic), but because their genetic memories are deemed important within the gameworld. Finally, that these heroes are prefigured with the partial UNSUNG lends an air of noble humility to them. We know that they are not doing what they do for glory and recognition, because they did not get any (until now).

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<sup>31</sup> *Valhalla* allows players to choose either a male or female Eivor. The surname for the male Eivor is never mentioned but would presumably be Varinsson rather than Varinsdottir. For simplicity, and because this is how I played the game, in my text I stick to the female Eivor.

## Genetics as the basis for a technological preordained hero

Genetic memory is at the heart of the series. We have already seen genetics mentioned with regards to Eagle Vision and the *unsung hero* in this context, and it shall appear in many other aspects besides. Genetic memory is the backbone of the series' framing narrative. Each game has at least two distinct worlds: the historical period for which most games are best known, and the framing world set in the present. These are linked by the Animus, developed by Abstergo Industries, the modern-day front for the Templars. The Animus decodes the users 'genetic memories' and renders them as a virtual reality world that the user can explore. This means that the user can access much of the life of any of their ancestors. This is why Desmond Miles, the playable figure in the modern era of the original trilogy, is so fiercely sought by both Abstergo (the Templars) and the Assassins: his ancestors, including Altaïr, Ezio, Edward Kenway and Ratonhnhaké:ton, were involved with the Pieces of Eden, and so their memories might provide clues as to where they now reside.

That genetics are the series' vehicle into the past reinforces an overarching notion of scientism, that only through science can we uncover the truth. We do not travel to our ancestors via shamans or other religious figures. It is a technological advancement brought about by a private corporation that grants us access to the past. Of course, the notion of genetic memory in the way it is used here is science fiction. In reality, the concept of genetic memory is confined to minuscule amounts of information (e.g., Yang et al., 2014) or more indirectly through concepts like intergenerational trauma (e.g., Isobel et al., 2021). So *Assassin's Creed* uses a science fiction concept as an engine for its alternate history, suggesting that we may be able to unlock and uncover conspiracies in the future when we have improved technology.

The use of genetics as the engine also imposes a perhaps unexpected model of heroism: the *hero of bloodline*, a form of the *preordained hero*. One is born a hero, one does not become one. As noted, in *Fate of Atlantis* even the power of a particular bloodline is scientifically explained by interbreeding between a human and an Isu. This relates Desmond and his ancestors to other such mythologies of heroic bloodlines. Many of the ancient Greek heroes were a similar hybrid, such as Heracles being the offspring of Zeus and the mortal princess Alcmene, or Achilles as the son of a Nereid, Thetis, and King Peleus. Supernatural ancestry comes to justify supernatural powers through the bloodline. Thus *Assassin's Creed* playable figures also have the partial DIVINE.ANCESTRY.

However, in the series divinity is scientifically explained: all so-called gods were actually Isu, whose true nature people did not yet understand. Juno, Jupiter, Odin, Thor, Seth, Osiris, and so on are all simply Isu who became revered as gods by people who did not have sufficient scientific knowledge to properly understand them. The DIVINE part of DIVINE.ANCESTRY is then taken to be only a surface-level, naïve reading. What we think of as divine is *actually* just another species, ancient and humanoid. Religion, myth and folklore are positioned as the partially correct but ultimately lacking explanations for forces that can be properly explained by science. Divinity and heroism are in this way both accounted for by genetics,

displaying a myth of mythlessness that all mythologisations are actually misunderstandings that can be cleared up by science.

## Birds and their meanings

Birds of prey are a recurring set of integers throughout the series and act as intermediary figures who connect each playable Assassin both to the player, through gameplay, and to the game's explicit mythological setting. Each allohistorical playable figure has a corresponding bird of prey, sometimes as an actual companion who assists them, sometimes more as seemingly inherited powers. Altaïr and Ezio's names both mean 'eagle', for example. In the latest three games which mark the series' shift to openworld roleplaying games—*Origins*, *Odyssey* and *Valhalla*—each playable figure has a bird of prey companion. Bayek in *Origins* has a Bonelli's eagle named Senu, Kassandra<sup>32</sup> in *Odyssey* travels with a golden eagle called Ikaros, and Eivor in *Valhalla* is granted Odin's Sight via her raven Sýnir. With each of these heroes being so closely associated with these birds, the mythologies both of birds of prey in general and the specific birds become bound up with the construction of the hero. Birds of prey in general are associated with heightened senses ('eyes like a hawk', for example), fast reactions, impossible speed, and the freedom of flight ('free as a bird'; the US mythologisation of the bald eagle with freedom). In a broader sense, the frequent association of the series' heroes with birds of prey could also signal a link with the natural world. The goal of the Assassins is in some way tied with it or supported by nature itself, grounding the Assassins' political cause as inevitable and natural.

There are too many different specific birds of prey used to consider each. Instead, I want to touch on two examples: Kassandra and her golden eagle, Ikaros, in *Odyssey* and Eivor and her raven, Sýnir, in *Valhalla*.

Before getting to Ikaros' namesake, the golden eagle itself is richly mythologised, particularly in the game's ancient Greek context. The golden eagle was highly revered by the ancient Greeks. The *Aetos Dios*, Eagle of Zeus, was a giant golden eagle and Zeus' companion. Though not all eagles in ancient Greece were associated with Zeus, Seán Hemingway notes that "when another myth was not made explicit the possibility of an association with Zeus is likely to have been a primary consideration" (2015, pp. 103–104). That the majestic raptor should be associated with the sky god is perhaps not surprising, but is still significant. More than a powerful bird of prey, the eagle was seen as executing Zeus' will.

Kassandra's companionship with Ikaros is also not typical within the gameworld, earning her the epithet 'Eagle Bearer' during her career as a *misthios*, a mercenary. Kassandra's bond with a golden eagle represents not only a capable ally, then, but a connection with Zeus. Whether favoured by the sky god, directly carrying out his divine will, or even an incarnation of Zeus himself, Kassandra's bond makes her far more formidable to her enemies. Of course, many players now will not be fully aware of this ancient Greek mythologisation. However, the emulated ancient Greek mythology is conveyed to the player early on,

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<sup>32</sup> Along the same lines as *Valhalla*, players in *Odyssey* may choose a male or female playable figure: Alexios and Kassandra. In my text I use Kassandra as the playable figure. This is more important to note in *Odyssey* because whichever sibling not picked becomes one of the main antagonists, Deimos.

even if not in great detail. For example, in the game's first quest, 'So It Begins', Kassandra's young protégé Phoibe asks, "Do you think Zeus would bless me with an eagle? Like he blessed you? ...Maybe you could ask him for me!" (Ubisoft Québec, 2018). Even if the player was not already aware of the mythological connection between golden eagles and Zeus, Phoibe tells us very early on that there is such a connection, and that that connection is remarkable in this culture. This might lead us to go so far as to consider Kassandra a stand-in or representative for Zeus, which would imply other parallelisms, at least potential ones. For example, a tumultuous relationship with siblings, which is borne out in the Kassandra-Alexios (Deimos) dynamic and reinforced by their corresponding diagrammatic relations:

ZEUS/HADES	=BROTHER/BROTHER=RIVAL/RIVAL=OVERWORLD/UNDERWORLD
KASSANDRA/DEIMOS	=SIBLING/SIBLING=RIVAL/RIVAL=PROTO-ASSASSIN/PROTO-TEMPLAR

Or the arbitration of law and justice, which therefore helps to bestow the Assassins' cause with a divine righteousness—Ken Dowden notes that “as Zeus is a projection in heaven of kings on earth, it follows that he is responsible for the declaring of justice and its implementation” (2006, p. 73). Or a connection to thunder and lightning which can symbolise a just command of order over chaos (Dowden, 2006, p. 64).

Ikaros' namesake is also significant, more commonly known in English as Icarus, the son of Daedalus, most famous for their tragic escape from Crete. This is one of the most well-known ancient Greek tales and is taken as a cautionary one. As Stephen Fry writes in his popular retelling, “it is the destiny of children of spirit to soar too close to the sun and fall, no matter how many times they are warned of the danger. Some will make it, but many do not” (2019, p. 391). The name Icarus is now synonymous with complacency and hubris. These two traits do not seem borne out in Ikaros the eagle or Kassandra, however. Ikaros is perhaps then mythologised similarly to Barthes’ (1972/2009, p. 157) example of  $E = mc^2$ , taken as a whole and used as a signifier of mythicity *as such*, situating Kassandra’s quest in mythicity from the beginning.

In *Valhalla*, Eivor’s raven companion Sýnir is similarly remarkable. Most will be at least passingly familiar with the significance of ravens in Norse folklore, being Odin’s companions (see S. A. Mitchell, 2018; Sayers, 2022). Odin’s ravens traditionally are named Huginn and Muninn (Old Norse for ‘thought’ and ‘memory’, respectively, although *muninn* is less straightforward to translate). Sýnir rhymes with both Huginn and Muninn and is Old Norse for ‘sight’ or ‘vision’—the definite form of *sýn*—aligning with Odin’s ravens as well as with both physical and prophetic sight. Just as Odin’s ravens fly around Midgard gathering intelligence for Odin, Sýnir grants Eivor the power of Odin’s Sight, allowing the player to see through Sýnir’s eyes. The motif ODIN’S.RAVENS GATHER INFORMATION FROM:WORLD is thus actualised in a gameplay mechanic as Odin’s Sight, holding onto the kernel that it is *through* ravens that information is acquired.

The connection between Eivor and Odin becomes even more straightforward when it is revealed that Eivor is a reincarnation of Odin. Odin is, in *Assassin’s Creed*, not a god but an

Isu who in the Great Catastrophe had ‘uploaded himself’. In *Assassin’s Creed*, reincarnation is explained by information and data transfer. It might initially seem strange, however, for the hero to be associated with Odin rather than Thor, for example. As Frog notes, Thor—along with other thunder gods in the Circum-Baltic region—is more associated with motifs regarding the defeat of enemies, such as THOR SLAYS GIANT~MONSTER (2021a, p. 176), strongly enough that the motif becomes a partial, MONSTER-SLAYER, of THOR (2021a, p. 186). Thor is “the defender of gods and men alike” (Simek, 1993/2007, p. 317), and has traditionally been seen as the god of the farmers and the people, as opposed to Odin’s patronage of the nobility (Simek, 1993/2007, p. 319). Thor in this way might make more sense as a hero figure. In contrast, Joonas Ahola notes that distinct markers of Odin can include “old age, tallness, a beard, a staff and having only one eye” (2021, p. 381). In popular conception,<sup>33</sup> Odin as the All-Father is a far loftier and more distant figure than Thor, associated with the nobility. Indeed, if Kassandra is associated with Zeus, Thor would also make for a closer parallelism on that front, being both thunder gods.<sup>34</sup> Where it may make sense is in Odin’s association with knowledge and information, which could fit the sceptical, rational thrust of the series more closely.

Birds in *Assassin’s Creed* thus operate on two axes: inter- and intra-mythic discourses. Intradiscourses refer to the specificities of each individual bird of prey: Sýnin and the relation to ravens, Odin, sight, and so on; Ikaros and the connection with Zeus as a golden eagle in Greece. Interdiscourses then link these specific instances together across the series with their commonalities. For example, they are all birds of prey with local folkloric connections, all the birds provide some form of sight gameplay mechanic, they are all close personal companions of the protagonist, unusually so within the gameworld. That the birds operate on both of these axes of discourse cyclically lends gravitas to the overall role of birds in the series. Because of the interdiscourses, in each game we know that there is an important ASSASSIN/BIRD.OF.PREY relationship. Because of the intradiscourses—the specific communication within each bird’s own folkloric tradition—we reciprocally reinforce that this relationship is important and that the bird and therefore the playable figure are singular in the gameworld. These are not gameworlds in which person–bird companionships are commonplace. Furthermore, notably, we are also not led to believe that these companionships are the

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<sup>33</sup> The reality of any coherent Norse ‘pantheon’ and Odin’s supremacy over it has been convincingly challenged by Terry Gunnell (2013, 2015), and the concepts of the *Æsir* and the *Vanir* as meaningfully separate families of gods by Rudolf Simek (2010) and Frog (2021b) in their respective ‘obituaries’. However, the popular modern conception, which the game’s developers and players are more likely to be familiar with, envisages a single, rigid, stable Norse pantheon (with the Greek-derived term being not coincidental in terms of where the conceptualisation comes from) of families of gods with their respective roles.

<sup>34</sup> This can be seen most obviously in the *interpretatio germanica*, “the renaming (and thus identifying) of Roman gods with the names of Germanic gods by the Germanic peoples” in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE (Simek, 1993/2007, p. 174). This interpretation appears in the days of the week, for example, whereby *Pórsdagr*, Thursday or ‘Thor’s day’, is directly corresponded to *dies Jovi*, the day of Jupiter. Jupiter is usually identified directly with the Greek Zeus. However, Simek notes that there was also a strong correlation between Thor and Hercules in the reverse of the *interpretatio germanica*, the *interpretatio romana* (the Germanic peoples’ interpretation of Roman religion), so much so “that it is rather surprising that Thor was identified as Jupiter” (1993/2007, p. 322). Nonetheless, the prevailing connection in popular culture is between Thor and other thunder gods like Zeus and Jupiter.

result of long processes of training and domestication. Rather, the relationship is shown as innate or divine (such as Kassandra being “blessed” with Ikaros), which is further reinforced (and rationalised) in *The Fate of Atlantis* with the revelation that Eagle Vision is genetically Isu. There is an innate connection between the protagonists and birds of prey, reinforcing the series’ *preordained hero* model of heroism.

## “Requiescat in Pace”: Dignity and mercy



Figure 9. Ezio eases Juan Borgia the Elder down in the Animus memory corridor as they have their final conversation.

The phrase “requiescat in pace” becomes seared onto the mind of the player of the Ezio trilogy, *Assassin’s Creed II*, *Brotherhood*, and *Revelations* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2009, 2010, 2011). Latin for ‘rest in peace’, Ezio utters this phrase at the close of almost every ‘death scene’. Upon a successful assassination of a major foe in the series, the outside world disappears leaving the playable figure and the victim alone in the default Animus void, called the memory corridor. They have a final conversation, which varies from the victim offering justification, defiance, regrets, apologies, bargaining, scorn and so on. For example, when Ezio kills Juan Borgia the Elder (Figure 9), their conversation proceeds as such:

- |               |  |
|---------------|--|
| <b>Borgia</b> | The things I have felt, seen and tasted. I do not regret a moment of it.   |
| <b>Ezio</b>   | A man of power must be contemptuous of delicacies.   |
| <b>Borgia</b> | But... I gave the people what they wanted.   |
| <b>Ezio</b>   | And now you pay for it. <i>Il piacere immeritato si consuma da sé.</i><br>(Pleasure unearned consumes itself.) <i>Requiescat in pace.</i> (Rest in peace.) |
- (Ubisoft Montreal, 2010)

Ezio is notable for his memorable coda, but protagonists in the series tend to take a similar tone: quiet resolve for the decision to take the person's life and a degree of mercy, or at least not revelling in the killing. Last rites, essentially. In some games of the series, this works differently. In *Unity* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2014), for example, killing a target shows a cutscene of their memories before returning to the present moment—there is no conversation. And yet playable figure Arno Dorian still often says “*repose en paix*”, ‘rest in peace’. Frank G. Bosman describes this as a ritual that goes as such:

- (1) the Assassin holds the head of his target in his arms, as the target lies on the ground; (2) the Assassin and his target exchange last words, usually in the form of a confession by the latter; (3) the Assassin closes the eyes of the dead person; (4) the Assassin collects a sample of the victim's blood; and (5) the Assassin ritually utters a final short prayer, usually ‘rest in peace’ or a variation thereof. (2018, p. 12)

As a ritual, this can be straightforwardly codified into mythic integers:

- A1. ASSASSIN HOLDS:HEAD OF:DYING.ENEMY
- A2. DYING.ENEMY SPEAKS LAST.WORDS
- A3. ASSASSIN CLOSES DYING.ENEMY'S.EYES
- A4. ASSASSIN GIVES LAST.RITE

This puts the Assassin in an oddly priestly position. In a Catholic Commendation of the Dying, for instance, the ritual is nearly the same. The order is first the Sacrament of Penance, whereby sins confessed can be absolved, then the Anointing of the Sick, whereby the person is anointed with oil, and finally Viaticum, administering the Eucharist so that the person does not die alone, but with Christ. The Assassin's ritual does not require a confession, but allows space for it. It does not anoint or absolve the victim, but it does treat them with a basic level of respect and reverence. It does not administer the Holy Communion, but it does ensure that they do not die alone. This parallelism has a number of implications, including inculcating the Assassins as not only political actors but spiritual leaders of a kind, leaders with a connection to a metaphysical realm beyond the immediate, material circumstances. And it serves as an element shared by hero and opponents, similar to the dragon language in *Skyrim*, when the Assassin's ritual shows so much overlap with the Templars' Christian sacraments.

Bosman argues that this ritual “evinces piety and respect for the victim, making the act less about personal motives or vendettas and more about ‘something that has to be done’ for the greater good of the Brotherhood’s long-term goals” (2018, p. 11). In this way, the Assassin's last rites work to distinguish the gruesome work of assassination from that of their enemies. After all, both are killing people and causing disruption and fear. But by showing the Assassin taking the moral high ground with their basic reverence for the taking of a life, and by showing through ritual that that life is taken not for pleasure or selfish gain but for the greater good, the motives for killing are turned heroic. The ritualisation of killing in this way turns it into a *necessary* evil.

## Discussion

The rationalisation and scientification of religion are perhaps the most striking and pervasive aspects of the *Assassin's Creed* series. The series heavily features religious iconography, which get associated with evil and are often destroyed. *Assassin's Creed II* ends in a fist-fight with Pope Alexander VI! Religion in the series takes the role of one of the outdated understandings of myth that I explore in '2 What is Myth?': myth as primitive science. Religions in the series are shown as partial and faulty understandings of the world, but ones which do get some things right. Religion is used to partially explain, but ultimately to obscure and control, while science is powerful and liberatory, but also dangerous in the wrong hands. As de Wildt and Stef Aupers explain, "AC's depoliticized and universalized religion further translates all the mysteries of historical religions into the 21<sup>st</sup> century non-denominational vocabulary of science" (2021, p. 11). The games "use science fiction to explain beliefs and magic" (de Wildt & Aupers, 2021, p. 10), based on Arthur C. Clarke's famous 'third law' that "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic" (1968, p. 255). In the *Assassin's Creed* series, this manifests in revealing the 'science' behind religion:

In AC's alternative history, for example, Adam and Eve were just the first version of humanity: a robot slave race created by the Isu. The Turin Shroud is 'actually' a "nanotech matter regenerator" that can heal the owner, once owned by Jesus, and by Jason and the Argonauts who called it the Golden Fleece. The Apple of Eden was 'actually' a neurotransmitting mind-control device which, in the words of one character in AC1, "turned staves into snakes. Parted and closed the Red Sea. Eris used it to start the Trojan War; and with it, a poor carpenter turned water into wine." (de Wildt & Aupers, 2021, p. 11)

These sorts of 'actually' explanations will be familiar to players of the series (as well as other games, as I show in other examples). The broad idea is that the established religion (usually, but also other institutions at times) of the gameworld, fictional or not, gets about 80% of the way to the truth. But, over the course of the game, the final 20% is uncovered: the rational, scientific reasonings behind what were assumed to be supernatural, paranormal or divine phenomena, due to lacking information. The *Assassin's Creed* series begins by being about Christian theology, then a separate race of gods, the Isu, are introduced, and finally the Isu are revealed not to be gods, but a highly-advanced, humanoid species. Clarke's third law is fulfilled as that which was believed to be 'magic' was proven, in the end, to simply be technology that was too advanced for us to comprehend.

The universalising aspect that de Wildt and Aupers mention is also significant here. *Each* religion is *partially* right. *All* the 'gods' from each religion exist, they are just different factions of Isu. This flattens and universalises religions, reducing each of them to the status of an equal but partial lens, rather than conflicting models of the world. This has the effect also of reducing religions to their 'characters'—their gods and heroes. Their ontologies, cosmogonies and metaphysics are all broadly tossed out.

De Wildt and Aupers do not specifically analyse the role of the hero or the playable figure in the scientification of religion that they describe. However, by looking at the hero in particular we find an interesting expansion of de Wildt and Aupers' conclusions, as well as other findings. For example, it would seem to undermine the series' rationalist, scientific approach that one of the models of heroism employed is actually the *preordained hero*. Heroism as an innate, fundamental property is more typically at home in high fantasy, epic and classical settings, at least intuitively. More recent empirical, sociological approaches to heroism tend to eschew an essentialist ontology in favour of the everyday hero, one who rises to the occasion. However, *Assassin's Creed* scientises also the *preordained hero*, turning it into the *hero of bloodline*. Whereas in high fantasy (for instance), the *hero of bloodline* is a version of the *preordained hero* whereby the hero comes from a heroic lineage and is innately heroic because of that, *Assassin's Creed* explains and rationalises that heroic bloodline. You are descended from a human-Isu hybrid, and so inherit some of their powers. The power of ancient lineage and bloodline in the series demonstrates a much more *religious* mode of science, rendering it rather as scientism. Not only a specific and limited empirical set of methods, science becomes the very fabric of the world, the ultimate, omnicompetent arbiter of truth.

The *unsung hero* is used as a partial to leverage gaps in the historical depiction. By having each protagonist an unknown in an otherwise well-known setting and context, we begin immediately with the premise that we do not know all there is to know. Gaps such as these, once leveraged, become filled with the science-fiction explanations, establishing that *all* gaps in historical knowledge are due to insufficient technoscientific understanding. For example, the Pieces of Eden are not traced through a detailed archaeohistorical analysis of various source materials and so on, but by the science-fiction of accessing genetic memories, combining a fictitious expansion of the biological science of genetics (genetic memory), with a fictitious technology that provides an interface for that science (the Animus).

The *unsung hero* and the *preordained hero* and their connection to scepticism and conspiracy is reinforced by the use of interfaces and HUDs in the games. The way that interfaces are used both suggest that (a) we do not perceive true reality and require interfaces that limit but also reveal hidden aspects of the world, and (b) these interfaces are linked also to inherent traits propagated by genetic lineage. Previously I outlined the interaction between Desmond, Ezio and a Mercator projection of a world map which made no sense to Ezio:

- A1. EZIO SEES:MAP WITH:EAGLE.VISION
- A2. EZIO DOES NOT UNDERSTAND MAP
- B1. DESMOND SEES:EZIO THROUGH:ANIMUS
- B2. DESMOND&PLAYER UNDERSTAND TRUTH

This translates to the *preordained hero* more broadly:

- A1. GENETIC.ANCESTOR SEES:HIDDEN.TRUTH WITH:EAGLE.VISION
- A2. G.A DOES NOT UNDERSTAND HIDDEN.TRUTH
- B1. GENETIC.PROGENY SEES G.A THROUGH:ANIMUS
- B2. G.P&PLAYER UNDERSTAND HIDDEN.TRUTH

Interfaces are used in the game to show that most of the true world is hidden and inaccessible, requiring interfaces to be revealed. These interfaces both technology and inherent, genetic traits. This is best exemplified by the Animus itself: as a piece of technology, anyone can use it. But because it is used to access the user's genetic memories, only one of the right lineage can access the *right* genetic memories, the ones which reveal hidden truths which can be used in the present day.

The series might initially seem to employ a *hero-sceptic* model of heroism, but one that is interestingly flavoured by essentialism. Yes, it is about the sceptical dismantling of religious explanations of the world that ultimate obscure and control, but that dismantling can only be done by one with the correct lineage. The *hero-sceptic* model thus employs the *hero of bloodline* essentially as a partial. I describe the *hero-sceptic* as such:

- A1. RATIONAL.PERSON~SCIENTIST IDENTIFIES PROBLEM
  - A2. KNOWLEDGE.AUTHORITY ANSWERS~DENIES PROBLEM
  - A3. RATIONAL.PERSON~SCIENTIST IS.UNSATISFIED WITH:ANSWER~DENIAL
- B1. R.P~S SEEKS TRUTH
  - B2. R.P~S FINDS TRUTH
  - B3. TRUTH IS.INCONVENIENT FOR:K.A
- OR → B4. TRUTH=K.A CAUSED PROBLEM
- C. K.A OSTRACISES~THREATENS~ATTACKS R.P~S

But in *Assassin's Creed*, this becomes something more like:

- A1. TEMPLARS SEEK PIECES.OF.EDEN (TO:CONTROL.HUMANITY)
- A2. ASSASSINS SEEK PIECES.OF.EDEN (TO:STOP:TEMPLARS)
- A3. TEMPLARS AND ASSASSINS SEEK GENETIC.PROGENY
  - [TO:FIND:PIECES.OF.EDEN]
- B1. G.P ENTERS:ANIMUS
  - [B2. GENETIC.ANCESTOR=ASSASSIN<sup>35</sup>]
- C1. G.A FIGHTS [CONTEMPORARY.]TEMPLARS
  - C2. TEMPLARS USE PIECE.OF.EDEN
  - C3. G.A DEFEATS TEMPLARS
- D. G.P FINDS PIECE.OF.EDEN

You would be forgiven for asking where the scepticism is here. In contrast to the typical *hero-sceptic*, the conspiracy in *Assassin's Creed* is already unveiled. Indeed, it has been unveiled for millennia. Rather, the playable figure and the player are enlightened and introduced to the already-ongoing, omnihistorical Assassin-Templar clash. As they remain completely caught up on the inside of this struggle and communicate the truth only very partially to the uninitiated outside, there is little room for scepticism. By mapping out the heroic construction in this way, we see that the hero in the *Assassin's Creed* series is not a *hero-sceptic*

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<sup>35</sup> Usually, but not always. *Assassin's Creed III* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2012), for example, begins with the playable figure as Haytham Kenway, leader of the Colonial Templars during the French and Indian War, before then following Kenway's half-Mohawk son, Ratonhnhaké:ton, who becomes an Assassin.

in the usual sense, because they are not the ones who uncover and reveal the conspiracy or find the truth in spite of the institutional authorities. They are rather constructed as a *preordained hero* (more specifically a genetic *hero of bloodline*) within a world where the supernatural preordination is rationalised and absorbed into a scientism worldview. The sceptical nature of the series no doubt exists, but not principally in its heroic construction. Rather, the scepticism enters in as this grand conspiracy *into which* heroes are placed. The conspiracy itself is rather a more basic fact of the gameworld, presenting the unknown truth of the eternal struggle between Assassins and Templars.

## 5.8 Heaven's Vault

In Inkle's *Heaven's Vault* (2019), the player controls Aliya Elasra, an archaeologist at the University of Iox. Asked to search for missing colleague Janniqi Renba, Aliya and her robot assistant, Six, travel a region of space called the Nebula. In their search for Renba, Aliya and Six uncover the mysteries of an ancient civilisation whose undeciphered language is dotted around ruins on almost every moon in the Nebula, including Iox. The game draws strongly on 1980s point-and-click adventure games, offering a freely explorable gameworld, puzzles for the player to solve, and little to no violence. Aliya's search for Renba has her piecing together the ancients' puzzle which puts her in grave danger, ultimately leading to a final decision that determines the fate of herself and the Nebula. While there is no obvious villain, Aliya becomes heroic by stepping up not only to find her colleague Renba, putting herself in danger in the process, but also discovering why Nebula appears to be dying.

In this way, the dying Nebula has been compared with climate change, as both are "an ecological threat so vast and so all-encompassing that it is difficult for individual human beings to wrap their heads around" (Condis, 2020). The game's narrative director, Jon Ingold, also makes it clear that climate change was a direct inspiration for the game's central dilemma (Condis, 2020). Megan Condis argues:

As such, the true "villain" of *Heaven's Vault* is not some science fictional alien menace or evil army. It is complacency itself. It is routine. It is the established order of things, the embrace of willful ignorance in service of the status quo. Aliya's primary tool in the fight against this villain, therefore, is a deep and reflective understanding of the progression of history, which gives her insight into the choices that are available to her in the present. (2020)

With complacency and ignorance positioned as the scourge of the Nebula, scepticism and knowledge become heroic. Based on this, I begin with the prejudice that Aliya is a *hero-sceptic*. There is also—somewhat unusually—almost no violence and no combat in the game, which would further support that hypothesis. Her heroism is instead founded in her rationality and willingness to investigate more deeply into controversial areas, particularly in contravention of the dominant religion in the Nebula.

As an *archaeogame* (Reinhard, 2018), a game focused on archaeology, *Heaven's Vault* seems to diverge from the swashbuckling adventure-archaeologist in the vein of Indiana Jones, Lara Croft and Nathan Drake. *Heaven's Vault* has drawn praise from the field for this. Archaeologist Sebastian Hageneuer (2021) contrasts the game favourably with *Tomb Raider*:

*Heaven's Vault* solves very elegantly the problems of the *Tomb Raider* series and does not fulfil any imperialistic, racist, or sexual tropes, while still referencing them. Archaeology is displayed as the discipline it is, without ignoring the associated problems. (2021, p. 639)

This conclusion is corroborated in Condis' study, who stresses that "the primary mode of interaction" in *Heaven's Vault* "is not combat, but rather archaeological investigation (and not the gun-toting, treasure-hunting videogame version of archaeology à la *Tomb Raider*'s

Lara Croft (1996) or *Uncharted's* Nathan Drake (2007))” (2020). This is true to an extent, but being different from or better than other mythologisations of archaeology as a profession does not exempt *Heaven's Vault* from its own mythologisations. After all, Aliya is still a (more or less) lone, world-saving hero, something not many real-world archaeologists can claim. Aliya’s heroic construction is worth investigating in this context.

## **Aliya as an outsider: secularism and upbringing**

Aliya’s colleagues are all ardent believers in the Loop, the dominant religion of the Ioxian Protectorate, which believes that time is cyclical. This metaphysical cycle is responsible for the slow death of the Nebula. Aliya is sceptical of this religion from the beginning, even mocking her colleagues for their faith at times. During her archaeological adventures and the search for Renba, Aliya discovers the truth behind the Loop. As is so often the case with *hero-sceptic* narratives, the religion that Aliya dismantles is partially correct, but misses a few fundamental puzzle pieces. These final pieces are what allow Aliya to produce a fully rational, secular explanation for the phenomena around which the religion is based.

Therefore, in *Heaven's Vault*, we find a fairly straightforward rendering of at least the first part of the *hero-sceptic* as I have laid it out. Compare:

A1. RATIONAL.PERSON~SCIENTIST IDENTIFIES PROBLEM  
 → A2. KNOWLEDGE.AUTHORITY ANSWERS~DENIES PROBLEM  
 → A3. RATIONAL.PERSON~SCIENTIST IS.UNSATISFIED WITH:ANSWER~DENIAL

B1. R.P~S SEEKS TRUTH

With:

A1. ALIYA IDENTIFIES NEBULA.DYING  
 → A2. LOOPERS EXPLAIN NEBULA.DYING  
 → A3. ALIYA IS.UNSATISFIED WITH:EXPLANATION

B1. ALIYA SEEKS TRUTH

Interestingly, and unusually compared with other examples, the KNOWLEDGE.AUTHORITY is *both* the religious institution and the university, which seem entwined. Like the liberal ideal of the separation of the state and religion, there is also something uneasy with a too-close relationship between academia and religion. Immediately due to this connection we understand that the truth-seeking processes of the academy are being biased and hindered by a religious worldview. Aliya, as a *secular* academic, becomes uniquely placed to seek the truth.

Aliya’s background is also notable in making her an outsider amongst her colleagues. Aliya does not come from Iox, the Nebula’s political centre and home of the university, but from Elboreth, a once-great, now-poor moon most known for its slave market. When Aliya was young, Professor Myari took her in to the university life. Classicist Jane Draycott (2022) discusses Aliya’s background:

There is a tension when she travels and encounters people who view her as a coloniser and an interloper and judge her accordingly. She is described by Timor as having “the freedom of the two worlds” and being able to serve as

both an ambassador and a spy. However, he also points out that she is exceptional by design, that Iox raises one to silence all the others, deliberately indulging in tokenism. Yet as the game unfolds, it becomes clear that the patois used on Elboreth is very close to Ancient, meaning that her deprived childhood has in fact laid the groundwork for her academic future. (2022, p. 352)

Aliya is alienated from all, resented as a token by those from her home moon but unable to fully integrate with the Ioxian world she has moved into. In Draycott's correspondence with narrative director Ingold, Ingold explains that "for the story to make sense, Aliya has to be someone with a lot to prove, and nowhere to fall back to" (2022, p. 352). To facilitate Aliya's heroism, she must be an outsider from all. Draycott further notes that "the only reason that [Aliya] is able to travel all over The Nebula is that she is single and she has no caring responsibilities" (2022, p. 355). With no ties and no community that is truly her own, Aliya can see the situation from a wholly unique perspective, providing a foundation for the construction of a *hero-sceptic* who does not accept the received wisdom.

## Linguistics: Understanding through language

Condis (2020) and Hageneuer (2021) both identify the gameplay with the practice of archaeology. Within that archaeological practice, linguistics is foregrounded as one of the game's central mechanics. On each moon, archaeological finds will typically contain inscriptions of varying lengths and complexity. These inscriptions are at first meaningless to the player and indeed to the characters of the gameworld, for whom the language, known as Ancient, is lost and indecipherable. Upon finding inscriptions, the player slowly builds up a dictionary for the language, at first basic and fragmentary, but ultimately able to comprehend long, complex inscriptions. Ancient is hieroglyphic and "consists of about 1,000 individual signs and does actually form a real working language that the player learns over the course of the game" (Hageneuer, 2021, p. 637). The language puzzles work by showing the player the inscription and a selection of suggested definitions which they can then fit together (Figure 10, Figure 11):



Figure 10. A language puzzle attempting to solve an inscription on a "Battered Brass Lamp".



Figure 11. Attempting to solve a longer, more complex inscription on an “Ancient Page”.

Unconfirmed suggestions are suffixed with “?”, while confirmed words are marked by a tick. Words are confirmed by completing enough translations using that word such that Aliya or Six proclaim that they are now sure of the translation. Certain translations of specific hieroglyphs can later be used to make better-informed guesses about compound words consisting of two or more hieroglyphs. There are 46 individual glyphs that can be used individual or combined together (a full description of the language can be found in ‘Language/Spoilers’, 2022).

Intuitively, we might relate this linguistic focus to the *words of power* notion explored particularly in *Skyrim*, whereby a hero’s innate relationship with language is significant to their heroism. One of Aliya’s defining features is indeed her relationship with language. However, this example is notably different. Unlike in *Skyrim*, *Harry Potter*, *Arrival*, or any fantasy fiction in which language is used to conjure spells and so on, in *Heaven’s Vault*, Ancient does not *in itself* hold any power. Aliya does not cast spells with Ancient, cannot imbue items with magic using the hieroglyphs like runes in *Diablo II: Lord of Destruction* (Blizzard North, 2001). Aliya also does not have any innate ability to understand Ancient, *à la* the Dragonborn and *Thu’um*. Although, with that said, Ancient turns out to be close to Elboreth patois, which Aliya knows from her upbringing on the deprived moon. Unique among her colleagues for this upbringing (indeed, accused of being a token used to subdue the rest), the game does then lean somewhat into this innate linguistic ability.

Nonetheless, Ancient is like any other language in this context: a tool for communication and conveying meaning. And Aliya deciphers Ancient in a way that much more closely resembles the deciphering of real ancient languages (albeit understandably simplified): by making a series of educated guesses based on context and available information and reviewing those attempted translations in the light of new contexts and information. In other words, the linguistic ability of Aliya is much more closely related to the scientific method and scepticism than it is to inherent powers or magic. This at first appears similar to *Arrival*, whose hero-linguist similarly deciphers Heptapod B. However, Heptapod B, once understood, proves to be a language with *innate* power. In the way that the language structures

time, it fundamentally changes the experience of time for the understander.<sup>36</sup> Ancient has no such power. So rather than Aliya's linguistic ability directly enhancing her power, it instead enhances her *understanding*. In her sceptical mode, the power of the language is simply being able to better understand the Ancient civilisation, and thus to better see through the 'cloud' of religion that obscures the truth of the Nebula's impending doom.

In this way, linguistic ability is not an inherent power in itself as in the *words of power* construction. Instead, it feeds into the broader archaeological picture. The *words of power* notion might be described as such:

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HERO INNATELY.UNDERSTANDS MAGICAL.LANGUAGE
→ HERO DEFEATS:ENEMY~CHANGES:WORLD WITH:MAGICAL.LANGUAGE
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Whereas Aliya's linguistic ability is more along the lines of:

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ALIYA DECIPHERS ANCIENT.LANGUAGE
→ ALIYA UNDERSTANDS ANCIENT.CIVILISATION USING:ANCIENT.LANGUAGE
→ ALIYA DISCOVERS TRUTH USING:KNOWLEDGE.OF:ANCIENT.CIVILISATION
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Crucially here, Ancient as a language does nothing directly, but rather is a path to rational understanding, which is what solves the great dilemma. That these linguistic puzzles are one of the game's central kernels of gameplay underscores the rational, scientific, sceptical approach to heroism in *Heaven's Vault*.

## **Archaeology in the shadow of Indiana Jones and Lara Croft**

While foregrounded mechanically, the linguistic puzzles form a part of a broader archaeological approach. As both Condis and Hageneuer argue, *Heaven's Vault* stands in stark and explicit opposition to "the 'Golden Age of Archaeology' (like Indiana Jones)" (Hageneuer, 2021, p. 638). This Golden Age of Archaeology is itself an intricate mythic construction, involving swashbuckling adventures into 'exotic' lands, near-misses at the hands of ancient traps and curses, and little regard for native inhabitants, local culture or local artefacts (which are stolen for 'protection' or even simply sale). Indiana Jones is perhaps the most recognisable representative of this, but it is also seen in most popular depictions of archaeologists, including in games. Hageneuer examines the *Tomb Raider* series (1996–2018), for example, outlining three central problems:

1. Imperialism: The justification of looting and the connected communication of the *Orientalist trope* depicting ancient sites as resource to be exploited for treasures and hidden secrets.

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<sup>36</sup> For this reason, the film has been described by linguists as "a feature-length exploration of the implications of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis" (Engle, 2016, p. 95). The hypothesis is also known as linguistic relativity, referring to the idea that a speaker's worldview or cognition is affected by the structure of the language that they use. While the 'weak' version of this hypothesis (that language in some limited way affects perception) is broadly accepted, the 'strong' view (demonstrated in its extreme by Heptapod B) is not at all supported by evidence.

2. Racism: The portrayal of native populations as being helpless or under-developed in contrast to the western traveller that fulfils the *white saviour trope* of rescuing the nonwhite protagonists.
3. Sexism: The sexualisation of Lara as a female character in contrast to comparable male characters, and the communication that strong women need to have a certain physique. (2021, p. 636)

Variations of this model can also be seen in the *Uncharted* series (2007–2022), for example, as well as Indiana Jones games of course (Hageneuer, 2021, p. 632). Hageneuer notes that it seems that “game designers have picked up on these aspects of archaeology rather than what archaeology is about today” (2021, p. 636). Although not specifically talking about archaeology, Condis’ critique of *Horizon Zero Dawn* may offer an explanation. Discussing that game’s long-term ecological catastrophe, she notes that “the creeping, aeon-spanning, planet-wide threat of climate change cannot be adequately represented within play because it cannot be translated into a spectacular mechanic” (2020). The Indiana Jones or Lara Croft model of archaeology is no doubt more spectacular than the academic discipline today.

Despite *Heaven’s Vault* in Hageneuer’s assessment avoiding the problems of this more predominant mythologisation of archaeology, the Golden Age of Archaeology is central to its construction in the game’s refutation of it. In an interview, Ingold, whose father is renowned archaeologist Tim Ingold, remarks:

I read about the Golden Age of archaeology and, frankly, hated it. It seemed to me to make archaeology a weird, racist sport for rich people. I rewatched *Indiana Jones* and noted that it’s a film with no archaeology in it, but it is about a man rediscovering his faith in God in an evil world and is pretty good.

Looking to wider pop-culture, archaeologists either unleash monsters through their hubris (not very archaeology), or they discover Ancient Alien Superweapons That Change Everything (Imperialism.) (Reinhard, 2019)

Ingold goes on to describe how reading about the real archaeological work of Monica Hanna, an Egyptian Egyptologist, changed his perspective:

The idea I took from that was: archaeology is modern myth-making. We live in a scientific age: we believe only what we can evidence, and prove (or I thought we did three years ago, anyway). But as people we still need myths. We need to know who we are, whether we like it or not, and these stories shape our expectations and actions. America’s current descent into chaos is deeply tied to its belief in itself as a pioneer, fringe, wilderness country. Britain’s equally pitiful descent stems from our belief that we are all kings and queens and knights in armour. The story we tell about the past determines what we think is normal, and what is possible—and an archaeologist offers to develop that story from a solid, evidential basis.

So in our story, Aliya Elasra can alter the future of the world where she lives by changing the stories that people accept about where they came from. (Reinhard, 2019)

Inkle's mythology of archaeology is therefore an explicit and direct *response to* a more prevalent mythology of archaeology. While it is in part based on the work of real archaeologists such as Hanna and in part based on the imaginative process of fiction writing, it is also in part constructed by being *not*-Indiana Jones. In the cycle of mythology, the mythology is brought forward and therefore recognised, but is undermined and refuted in the game's usage of it.

Beyond the linguistic puzzles, the game's archaeology is systematised via the collection and cataloguing of objects, which feeds into the production and maintenance of a timeline. This timeline places objects and key events chronologically (according to Aliya's best knowledge at the moment, so it is acknowledged that some time labels are estimates or incorrect). Condis focuses on this timeline:

By placing these disparate events into one, giant, continuous flow of time, the game suggests both the relevance of the distant past on events in the present as well as the possibility that one's own actions—even those that seem insignificant in the moment—might be portents of world-altering events to come. As Ghosh writes: “the climate events of this era... are distillations of all of human history: they express the entirety of our being over time” (2016, p. 115). Thus, we can read the timeline, as a tool which fosters a sense of collective responsibility and empathy on a hugely vast scale. It is what allows us to conceive of the long chain of slow violence that has been occurring in this region, and what enables us to discover points of leverage where we might be able to break that chain. (2020)

For Condis, the timeline as an archaeological process implements as a gameplay mechanic a long, slow and systemic view of history. It also forecloses the possibility of the player to believe in the Loop. Loopers believe that time is fundamentally cyclical; with a linear timeline as the player's only means of organising finds, the game reflects and systemises Aliya's secular thinking.

This archaeological approach also denotes a largely nonlinear gameworld spatially. In constructing the timeline, the player must visit various sites. Because Aliya does not yet understand the Ancient civilisation, there is not very much to go on in terms of knowing where will be significant and for what. Therefore, choosing which site to visit next is an important part of the archaeological process in the game. The game offers suggestions, presenting these as Aliya's own thoughts. For example, when hovering over Iox on the Nebula map, Aliya thinks, “Iox, the home of the university... As always I could show some of my recent finds to Huang; he might have an opinion on my translations...” (Inkle, 2019). These suggestions reflect the current state of Aliya's knowledge. Early on, she may not see a reason to go to a particular moon, but will later on remark on what they might find there based on another discovery made in the intervening period. These suggestions serve as an unobtrusive

guide for the player, reminding them of pertinent information rather than requiring them to take notes themselves or remember lots of information. But, along with the language puzzles, it also reflects the sceptical, rational, scientific ideal. Assumptions and hypotheses are made according to the best available information, which are then updated as new information is acquired.

In this way, even the player's spatial navigation of the gameworld is oriented around a sceptical approach and archaeological principles. I have previously examined how game-world borders are constructed and what the particulars of their construction can tell us about the values of the gameworld (Ford, 2019b); in *Heaven's Vault*, traversal of the gamespace and the crossing of boundaries is invariably tied to the gathering of information, while synthesis of that information then provides new avenues for exploration, new borders discovered and traversed. This ties in with the mechanics of gameplay, in which all the player's modes of agency are to do with the sceptical interrogation of evidence and the deciphering of its meaning. In this way, a new mythology of archaeology is proposed in opposition to the predominant one, one which makes a more authentic representation of academic archaeology the engine of heroism, constructing a *hero-sceptic*.

## Discussion

The heroic mythologisation of Aliya as both a negation of the Indiana Jones mythology and in the model for understanding archaeology that her heroism proposes. Condis, Hageneuer and Draycott all agree that Aliya is a more realistic portrayal of archaeologists than what has come before, but it is important to note that it is *still* a mythologisation of archaeology constructed through a single heroic archaeologist. A singularly sceptical archaeologist whose unparalleled expertise saves the world is a flattering portrayal, but not enormously true to life. Draycott remarks:

The presentation of archaeology as something that is not undertaken by a lone polymathic hero but rather by a team of people working in collaboration, all of whom have different complementary strengths, and the acknowledgement that some aspects of archaeological research and small finds analysis take time to complete, is incredibly refreshing, and a far cry from Indiana Jones, Nathan Drake, or Lara Croft, in all her incarnations. (2022, pp. 349–350)

*Heaven's Vault* is no doubt a far cry from the Indiana Joneses of the world, but I would argue that the game *does*, in fact, portray a “lone polymathic hero”, albeit tempered. Aliya does make use of the expertise of colleagues and there is indeed an acknowledgement that detailed analysis takes time, but Aliya is ultimately the sole engine for solving the Nebula's dilemma. Other characters move around the Nebula very infrequently, Aliya and Six do the vast majority of the fieldwork, all significant breakthroughs are made by Aliya, and Aliya is singularly placed as a secular sceptic to see through the obscuring fog of religious belief to the true solution. Indeed, Draycott (2022, p. 352) observes that Aliya's colleagues are too afraid

to sail the rivers of the Nebula due to their religious beliefs. And so, most crucially in terms of constructing a hero, it *could not have been anyone other than Aliya*.

Reading Aliya's heroic construction reveals much of the game's mythology. This mythology is no doubt in opposition to other mythologies of archaeology and is certainly *closer* to reality, but nonetheless works both *through* and *as* myth. It works through myth in its explicit negation of more prevalent mythologies of archaeology and archaeologists. Recall in the mytholudic cycle that affirmation of the myth is a separate step prior to what is done *with* the myth. The spectre of Indiana Jones is raised by negation here. It is this negation that makes archaeologists on the whole pleased with the depiction of Aliya. But it is perhaps also pleasing because it is quite flattering and, crucially, still heroic. The game works *as* myth by constructing a *hero-sceptic* in the form of hero-archaeologist Aliya. Aliya's character, the Nebula as a setting, the inhabitants of the gameworld, and the structure of gameplay and spatial navigation all contribute towards this semantic centre of sceptical heroism.

## 5.9 Horizon Zero Dawn

Aloy, the protagonist and playable figure of *Horizon Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017), is an outsider to all. Raised by an exile of the Nora tribe, Rost, she eventually wins admittance back into the fold via the Proving, although her upbringing ensures that she is seen differently nonetheless. Because of this, while Aloy has an affection for and an affinity with the Nora clan she aspires to be a part of, she is not truly invested in its mythology. This, in addition to her also not being invested in any other clan nor caught up in their rivalries and feuds, provides Aloy a critical distance from all that seems to provide a strong foundation for a *hero-sceptic* construction.

The great evil that Aloy as a hero must rise to is known as the Derangement. For many years, robot animals lived peacefully alongside the various clans. But, not long before the beginning of the game, their behaviour suddenly and unexpectedly changed. The robots became increasingly hostile to humans. Each gameworld tribe develops theories for what caused this Derangement. The Carja see it as the Sun, their god, being displeased, requiring human sacrifices to be appeased. The Nora see it as the malicious scheme of the Metal Devil and eschew all Old World technology as a result. The Oseram see it as a result of their collective failure to maintain the wonderful machinery of the world. Fortunately, in *hero-sceptic* fashion, Aloy is able to see past these various competing frameworks of belief and can, over the course of the game, discover the *real* source of the Derangement and arrive at a solution for it.

### Child of the mountain? Types of preordination

Aloy is exceptional from birth, no matter from which perspective or mythological context it is seen. She appeared one day within the sacred mountain that is, according to the Nora, said to be the home of the All-Mother. The Nora High Matriarchs had conflicting views on this unexpected orphan. Teersa believed her to be a gift from the All-Mother, while Lansra thought her a dangerous spawn of the Metal Devil. The compromise was to send Aloy to be raised by Rost, who occupies a unique and complex position as an outcast of the tribe but a highly-respected one. The truth, discovered over the course of the game, is that Aloy is a clone of Elisabet Sobeck, an ‘Old One’ who led the *Horizon Zero Dawn* project. The clone was produced by the AI GAIA in order to restore itself and combat the rogue AI HADES.

Notably, even the rational, true explanation for Aloy’s birth is as exceptional as the religious explanation. Even if she is not the gift of a god or the tool of a devil, she is a one-of-a-kind clone of a long-gone people. This constructs Aloy then as a *preordained hero*, more specifically a *hero of prophecy*:

- A. SUPERNATURAL AGENT PROPHESES DEVIL AND HERO
- B. DEVIL EMERGES
- C. HERO EMERGES
- D. HERO SLAYS DEVIL

In *Horizon Zero Dawn* we can see Teersa’s and Lansra’s competing theories fit:

LANSRA PROPHESISES ALOY=AGENT.OF.METAL.DEVIL

→ ALOY=DOOM

TEERSA PROPHESISES ALOY=HERO

[← {D. ALOY SLAYS METAL.DEVIL}]

Lansra pessimistically theorises that Aloy is the daughter of the Metal Devil and therefore brings doom, while Teersa prophesises that Aloy is a gift and the tribe's salvation, implying (but not stating explicitly as Lansra does, hence the brackets) that she will fulfil the HERO SLAYS DEVIL conclusion of the *hero of prophecy*. In the true explanation, what is religious or supernatural in the Nora explanations become rationalised, but the broad structure remains the same:

B. HADES EMERGES

C. GAIA CREATES ALOY[=ELISABET.SOBECK.CLONE]

D. ALOY SLAYS HADES

Instead of a prophecy as such or some other form of divine will, this is rationalised into a process of cause and effect. The AI GAIA observes the problem of the rogue AI HADES, and so *produces* (rather than prophesying) the HERO to SLAY the DEVIL. In this case, the 'prophecy' is rather a contingency plan set up well in advance. The clones exist essentially as a failsafe. The lead designers of the Zero Dawn project are known as the Alphas; only their gene print would grant access to the Alpha Registry. If, for whatever reason, there was a major issue with GAIA, then someone with Alpha Registry access would be needed to access GAIA's core systems to see if they can be rebuilt. This is what happened when HADES attempted to take over GAIA, so GAIA overloaded the GAIA Prime reactor, leading to a breakdown of the terraforming system and thus the Derangement.

The 'prophecy' of the *hero of prophecy* here is then similar to the divine or supernatural prophecies found elsewhere in that it is a set of circumstances set in motion by a largely incomprehensible, nonhuman actor a long time ago. But in this science-fiction gameworld, we are again shown that divine or supernatural elements are all in fact explicable by science and technology, as in *Assassin's Creed*. More specifically, this represents an almost literal science-fiction form of the *king under the mountain* folklore motif (Thompson, 1955), the slumbering hero who will rise in a time of great need. Eternal sleep becomes genetic material cryogenically frozen, the great need becomes a rogue AI, and the awakening becomes a benevolent AI executing commands.

## Divine AIs and the technologization of deities

What is perhaps most notable in the scientification of the *preordained hero* is that the supernatural, the divine and the metaphysical become AIs. The instigator and indeed upholder of the 'prophecy' is the AI GAIA, while the 'great evil' is another AI, HADES. Heroism is still ascribed to a human, but divine beings become AIs. This connection is made obvious by their naming conventions, with each AI named after ancient Greek gods according to their function:

GAIA	The most advanced AI, in charge of terraforming the Earth after the Faro Plague so that it may again be fit for human habitation. In charge of the other AIs, known as the subordinate functions.
AETHER	Detoxifies and stabilises the atmosphere.
APOLLO	An archive of all human knowledge and an educational facility for the humans grown from cryogenically frozen eggs. However, it was damaged and thus could only provide the humans with kindergarten-level education (hence the ‘primitive’ state of the gameworld’s tribes).
ARTEMIS	Reintroduces animals from preserved genetic stocks.
DEMETER	Reintroduces plants from preserved genetic stocks.
ELEUTHRIA	Stores cryogenically-frozen human embryos intended for reintroduction to the world once terraformed
HADES	A failsafe function whereby an unsuccessful terraforming can be reverted back to a barren Earth for GAIA to start again.
HEPHAESTUS	Produces the Zero Dawn terraforming machines, the robots later subject to the Derangement.
MINERVA <sup>37</sup>	Primarily used to brute-force the Faro robots’ deactivation codes over time and then broadcast them.
POSEIDON	Detoxification of the Earth’s hydrosphere.

By aligning the AIs with gods, it underscores the deification of AIs, that in this world AIs replace the previous mythological, religious need for gods.

It is also significant that these AIs are named after a polytheistic pantheon of famously tumultuous and dysfunctional gods. Rather than, for example, the omnipotent, omnibenevolent, omniscient Judeo-Christian God, the game draws on a family of gods well-known for their internal struggles, imperfections and vices alongside their magnificence and power. That these AIs represent both moral extremes—GAIA as saviour of the world and HADES threatening to destroy it completely—perhaps reflects our relationship with AIs and our sublime reaction to them. AIs are some of our most powerful tools, but we also do not fully understand them, they think very differently to us. And so there is an unpredictability there, where their great power is capable of great evil precisely because we do not fully understand how they work and so the parameters we set up can have unintended consequences. De Wildt argues that in this case, *Horizon Zero Dawn* uses “metaphors of divinity in order to make sense of the destructive and awe-some power of technologies” (2020, p. 162). He links

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<sup>37</sup> Curiously, MINERVA stands out as the only AI named after a Roman god instead of a Greek god. Athena would be the ancient Greek equivalent.

this volatile, sublime power also to anxieties regarding the centrality of humanity. The apocalypse was caused by AI robots, but so too was the preservation of humanity ensured only by AIs: “humans no longer dominate and control life” (2020, p. 160). Jesús Fernández-Caro argues in this vein that both GAIA and HADES must ultimately die to show “that the existing life forms on Earth are already independent and do not need divine action”, pitting the posthuman against the transhuman (2019, p. 53).

It is also worth examining a notable omission here. Where is Zeus? We might not expect each and every ancient Greek god to appear, but the omission of Zeus at least stands out. The king of the gods, the allfather, might be an obvious choice for a central, ruling AI. In this way, Zeus’ presence would no doubt undermine GAIA’s position as the superlative AI. Therefore, we can see Zeus’ omission as part of the game’s overall matriarchal framing. GAIA is the chief AI; Aloy is the hero; Elisabet Sobeck headed the Zero Dawn project; Aloy was born in a mountain known as the All-Mother; the Nora tribe with whom we spend most time with is deeply matriarchal. By contrast, the game’s antagonists are all men: HADES; Ted Faro; leader of the Shadow Carja Helis; High Priest Bahavas and his personal guard Shivin; the deposed, despotic Sun-King Jiran; the renegade Oseram warlord Dervahl; the slaver Zaid. This is not a misandric game: plenty of good characters too are men and, furthermore, Dalila Forni remarks that “Aloy goes beyond gender: she is a woman, but her main characteristic is not to be female” (2019, p. 92), an argument which Jennings takes further to claim that Aloy is “innocuously imitative of a default masculinity” (2022, p. 336). But whether undermined or not, the hierarchy of AIs and the omission of Zeus shows that Greek mythology is drawn on here in a particular way to reinforce a matriarchal core to the game, alongside the metaphor of divine sublimity applied to technology.

## Last of the Old Ones: Remnants of a mythic past

Intertwined with the pressing contemporary issue of the game is the question of Aloy’s peculiar origins. Who is she? Why is she different? In what way, exactly, was she ‘birthed’ by the mountain, seemingly with no parents? In the device Aloy finds as a child, the Focus, why does she keep seeing and hearing references to someone who seems to be her mother? The Nora tribe speculate, but the truth is eventually revealed that the woman in the Focus is herself. It is Elisabet Sobeck, lead scientist on the Horizon Zero Dawn project, a clone of whom was brought to life after almost a thousand years by GAIA in the form of Aloy. As such, Aloy is essentially the last living remnant of the Old Ones, who are a mythological focal point for most of the game’s tribes.

While the big reveal that Aloy is a clone is held back until late in the game, she demonstrates throughout an unusual affinity for the technology of the Old Ones (such as the Focus) as well as a sharp intuition for their practices. In the gameworld, the Old One are the mysterious, ancient civilisation who disappeared seemingly without a trace and left behind incomprehensible technological marvels. The Old Ones, we figure out rather quickly, are ‘us’

in our near-future.<sup>38</sup> In the Carja capital city, Aloy speaks to Studious Palas, a merchant and collector of mysterious ritual vessels. Studious Palas says of the vessels:

I'm convinced they were used in conjunction with each other in sets. Some people believe they were used for tea ceremonies. Others think they held sacred essences and oils for worship. But I believe they were used for the solemn custom of shaving one's beard. One for water, one for lotion, and so on. Each fluid in its special vessel, majestically applied to the face, at each stage of the rite. It must have been breathtaking! (2017)

"Are you sure people didn't just drink out of them?" Aloy suggests. Studious Palas is taken aback. "Drink? Out of such finely crafted earthenware? Don't be ridiculous!" The 'ritual vessels' in question here are, the player will recognise, mugs. Ordinary, branded coffee cups. But in the world of *Horizon Zero Dawn*, they are collectibles called Ancient Vessels. Arranged into sets of four, these can be traded with Studious Palas in exchange for lucrative rewards as he conducts his research on what meaning these strange vessels held for the Old Ones.

Exchanges like these play with our position as players as the object of mythology. We are the Old Ones, and we are experiencing, without being able to respond, how future post-apocalyptic societies conceptualise, understand and mythologise us. The Nora believe we succumbed to the siren song of technology, the Oseram that we failed to maintain the machinery of the world. While these are more abstract and grander in scale, collectibles like the mugs align us in our rational certainty with Aloy, and reciprocally align Aloy with rational certainty. No, we do not (typically) hold coffee cups as sacred and use them ritually for shaving. To the extent that we do, it is *not* because the cups are particularly difficult to produce—the vessel that Studious Palas holds is clearly a cheap, mass-produced mug. Time and time again, we watch Aloy see through the misguided speculation and mythologisation as her more materialist and functionalist readings are consistently proven correct. And as the game goes on, we see that Aloy's more scientifically oriented, Occam's Razor applying, materially based approach to what she learns of the Old Ones is proven right. The final explanation is essentially that ambitious AI got way out of hand, a moonshot scientific project was launched not to avert apocalypse, which was by then inevitable, but to build an AI system that could slowly terraform and repopulate the world. That project went mostly but not entirely wrong due to last-minute, malicious human intervention, and Aloy must fix the issues and tie up its loose ends. No All-Mother, no Metal Devil, no world-machine, no short-tempered sun-god. Our unique perspective as the *object* of mythology here puts us in a position where we *know* that most of the religion and mythology of this world is false. We see through it, and this allows us to confirm Aloy's scepticism as correct.

With Aloy as our lens, this plays into what Jewett and Lawrence call the "*myth of mythlessness*" (1977/1988, p. 17), the notion that we live in a society that no longer has myths.

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<sup>38</sup> The 'us' is rather loose, of course. The game is set in what we may recognise as parts of Colorado, Utah, northern Arizona and Montana, and the Old Ones live until the great disaster in 2066. 'Us' then more specifically refers to Americans in a particular part of the United States. But, because of the saturation of US culture (particularly in the Anglophone West), the cultural references will at least be recognisable to most players, even if not strictly reflective of their own sociocultural experience.

Myths are the preserve of primitive peoples; we are ‘too advanced’ for that. The ‘primitive’ tribes of *Horizon Zero Dawn* are rich in myth, while Aloy, the clone of an Old One scientist, ‘sees through’ the mythology, precisely because she is from a ‘less primitive’ and ‘more enlightened’ society. This view of myth falls into the “presupposition that myths are exclusive to ‘other people’” (Frog, 2018, p. 7). Through Aloy, we are encouraged to view the tribes of *Horizon Zero Dawn* as primitive others. This can be one of the consequences of the *hero-sceptic*, that everyone else is made to look stupid in comparison.

With that said, such scientific progress is not unambiguously good. We know, after all, where the Old One’s technological advancement led them. The Old One’s great disaster in 2066, particularly as it is *near-future* with respect to the game’s release in 2017, reflects one of the great fears of our age: the technological singularity. The notion of the technological singularity was popularised by computer scientist Vernor Vinge (1993), referring to a point where artificial intelligence eclipses human intelligence. Vinge (1993, p. 89) predicted that this would most likely occur between 2005 and 2030 (not long to go, then!). More recently, Vincent V. Müller and Nick Bostrom (2016) found that experts in the field predicted that artificial intelligence will advance to a potentially dangerous level by the middle of the century. Apocalyptic claims have been repeated in news outlets by well-known scientists like Stephen Hawking (Cellan-Jones, 2014) as well as tech billionaires like Elon Musk (Clifford, 2018). These fears are of course not without challenge in both academic and popular discourse (e.g., Fjelland, 2020; Marcus, 2022; Togelius, 2021), but it is fair to say that the fear is rife nonetheless. This kind of singularity is what happens to the Old Ones. However, it is also portrayed carefully as being primarily the fault of one man, Ted Faro, founder, owner and chairman of Faro Automated Solutions, the technology company which produced the AI robots which would eventually destroy humankind. The game draws attention to the fact that Faro developed the Biomatter Conversion system by which robots convert organic matter (including humans) into fuel, and that Faro ensured that there was no backdoor to the combat robots’ operating system. These two factors, caused specifically by Faro’s greed and recklessness, are what cause the Faro Plague. The game therefore to some extent individualises the risks of technological advancement. The advancement is not dangerous in itself, rather individual people can be corrupt.

## An innocent outcast: Critical distance

Aloy was raised by the outcast Rost from birth. Rost, and the upbringing he gave Aloy, is noteworthy here in that he is an honourable and respected outcast. Nora outcasts are typically outcast because they have broken a tribal law or taboo or left the Sacred Land. They are sentenced for a period of time (up to life) to live outside of any permanent tribal settlements. Outcasts are forbidden to receive help from or even speak to Nora and vice versa. Rost became a Nora Death-Seeker to avenge the brutal murder of his partner and daughter. A Death-Seeker is a fighter who is considered ritually dead and thus allowed to leave the Sacred Land for their quest, with the requirement that they never return. Rost succeeded in his vengeance but was badly wounded. Living near the border of the Sacred Land, tribal law was broken when tribe members crossed the border to bring Rost back and nurse him to health. The

justice of his quest and the sympathies of the tribe coming into conflict with strict tribal laws, Rost came to an agreement with the High Matriarchs that he would live within Sacred Land but as an outcast. Rost continued to be respected by tribe members, though they could not speak officially with him.

Due to Rost's peculiar position, he was given charge of the equally peculiar Aloy. With no mother in this matriarchal society, Aloy could not be a part of the tribe. And yet, as a baby who had committed no crime, a normal outcast sentence was difficult to countenance. The compromise was for her to be raised by Rost, an honourable and trusted outcast. Child outcasts, though rare, do have the chance to rejoin the tribe by completing the Proving, a gruelling coming-of-age rite and competition for which Rost trained Aloy.

So, due to a complex web of tribal laws and unusual circumstances, Aloy is an innocent outcast. She is separate and independent from the tribe, but still respectful and knowledgeable of its customs due to Rost's teaching. She is outcast from the tribe, yet more due to a technicality than due to anything she has done. As a *hero-sceptic*, this is one of the most crucial elements of Aloy's heroic construction and is what gives her the critical distance necessary to foster a sceptical mindset. Her and Rost's particular circumstances are also what spur her scepticism. What justice is there in a baby being outcast? How can Rost, the person who Aloy most loves and respects, also be outcast from this tribe, and yet teach Aloy that she should want to be a part of this tribe? These questions cause Aloy to question tribal teachings from a unique perspective outside of any established gameworld mythology, positioning her perfectly to be a singular *hero-sceptic*.

## Discussion

Aloy's heroic construction appears to be a mixture of the *hero-sceptic* and a technologized *preordained hero*. Aloy is born under mysterious circumstances, with implications which seem divine but an explanation for which cannot be agreed upon between the knowledge authorities of the gameworld. As a result, Aloy grows up as a figure between the world of the Nora and that of an outcast with Rost. Unsatisfied with the answers given by the tribe, Aloy sets out to discover her past and the dilemma facing the gameworld. In doing so, she faces peril and is exposed to alternate mythologies and worldviews. These explanations are also unsatisfactory. The true answer is found in the mythic past of the Old Ones, recovering recordings and documents that give clues as to what happened to extinguish their civilisation. As the Old Ones ourselves, the object of mythology, we know that Aloy is on the right path as we can already confirm from our own knowledge many of her speculations and can fill in other gaps before Aloy does. Aloy eventually discovers that she is herself from the mythic past, as a clone of an Old One.

Because 'we', as players, are the Old Ones, we are also invited alongside Aloy to be sceptical of the tribes' customs and practices, as exemplified in the mug scene with Studious Palas. This allows us to track Aloy's sceptical path as we are better equipped to solve the mystery and can be a step ahead. Rather than Aloy leading in scepticism and explaining to us how the mystery unfolds, the player finds themselves either in step with Aloy as big

revelations are made, or a step ahead when we can guess from inferences based on our current society a particular conclusion.

These elements combined make Aloy a figure-between-worlds in multiple senses. She has one foot in the Nora, but also a critical distance from it. She is of the contemporary tribal world and thus has the knowledge and experience to navigate it and survive in it, but she also has the all-important connection to the Old Ones, allowing her Alpha Registry access and thereby making her a *preordained hero*. She is a true synthesis of past and (her) present. The tribes exist only in their present, and so have an incomplete knowledge which becomes filled by mythology that ultimately obscures. Aloy's connection with the mythologised past becomes crucial.

Interestingly, however, it is important to note that Aloy's heroic construction is actually compatible with almost any perspective in the gameworld. The game is clear that all the tribal explanations for the origin of the machines and the Old Ones are ultimately wrong. But, nonetheless, they *are* congruent with Aloy's hero-myth. Aloy is *still* a *hero of prophecy*, just 'prophesied' by AI programming rather than by a mountain deity. Likewise, their view of the machines and the Derangement is given a religious explanation which is not entirely wrong, but simply perceives as a deity what is actually an AI. And the Oseram could be considered quite spot on with the claim that the Old Ones failed in maintaining the machinery of the world!

The game constructs Aloy's heroism such that it is not contingent on any specific mythology. This has two functions. One is to elevate Aloy's heroism. That her heroism is not contingent on anything else suggests that it is a transcendent heroism. It is not the case that by looking from a specific viewpoint we can see Aloy as a hero. Rather, Aloy *is*, fundamentally, by virtue of her scientifically explained creation in response to a peril, a hero, and each mythology must absorb that basic fact. Second, it demonstrates some sense of parity between the religious, 'mythical' explanations of the gameworld and the sceptical, 'amythical' explanations. What is common in *hero-sceptic* constructions is that the current explanation is mostly correct, but lacking some key (rational, scientific, secular) pieces that unlock the solution. But here, rather than being discarded as ultimately wrong or actively hampering progress, tribal knowledge is *vital*, both in facilitating Aloy to complete the quest and in leading her in the right direction. Tribal knowledge here is therefore not akin to conspiracy, like the Church in the Robert Langdon series or the Templars in *Assassin's Creed*. Rather tribal knowledge here has more affinity with increasingly prevalent views on Indigenous knowledge as offering vital knowledge that can only come from particular, local perspectives (Morris, 2010, p. 1). However, Jennings pushes back against this notion, arguing that Aloy's "performances as white explorer are re-enactments of manifest destiny ... She pursues her world-saving, furthermore, bedecked with cultural signifiers appropriated from Indigenous communities" (2022, p. 335). Nonetheless, we could say that the former interpretation is the mythology being produced—a mythology that Jennings pierces with her analysis.

In any case, central to this dynamic is Aloy as a cross-cultural wanderer, who acts as a focal point and reconfigurer of emulated mythic integers and motifs. Jennings argues that Aloy is a "White Messiah, multicultural umpire ... who alone can shepherd *HZD*'s diverse cast of NPCs through crisis" (2022, p. 336), situating the game in the heroic authoritarian

mode of Campbell's monomyth. That Aloy is the focal point for these cross-cultural mythic reconfigurations corroborates this analysis. Even if tribal knowledge is a necessary part of the solution rather than an obscuring part of conspiracy, it is still a tool that ultimately only Aloy is capable of using to save the world. In this way, the *hero-sceptic* mode sets the tenor of the events of the game, but the *preordained hero* is the more fundamental basis. We can see this also in the game's systems and gameplay. Rather than the sceptical perludic acts of *Heaven's Vault*, *Horizon Zero Dawn* employs now-classic third-person, openworld roleplaying game combat, crafting and exploration. Andrei Nae (2020) examines these systems in the game, arguing that "contrary to expectations, the overt critique of capitalism [in the game's cautionary plot] contributes to the naturalisation of the already covert capitalist principles that undergird gameplay" (2020, p. 275). Jennings draws on Nae's argument to show that *Horizon Zero Dawn* "exists for players' conquest and consumption, forced to ceaselessly and heroically sacrifice itself to its savior for her redemptive mission" (2022, p. 334). As such, we might see the particular instantiations of the *hero-sceptic* and *preordained hero* in *Horizon Zero Dawn* as new formations that seek to mask the authoritarian, monomythic heroic base behind an ostensibly multicultural, anticapitalist, feminist heroine portrayal. The explicit mythologies deployed (such as Greek gods) as well as the explicit emulated gameworld mythologies (such as the Nora religion) and the way they interact into a seemingly cautionary, feminist structure belie a much more traditional heroic mythology.

## 5.10 Conclusion: Heroism, mythology and games

With these varied and hopefully illuminating game examples, we now zoom back out. The point here is not to make any sweeping statements about heroism in games as such. The sample of games chosen is not exhaustive or representative enough for that. Some more tentative claims can be made—initial observations arising over the course of these five relatively detailed examples. Primarily, though, these examples are intended to exemplify the method. How does a mytholudic approach help us understand games? What kinds of interpretations does it produce? What kinds of questions can it be useful in answering? Does it help us to see these games in a new light? More specifically in this chapter I have taken a mytholudic approach to heroism in the chosen examples. Heroism as a lens helps to focus these analyses. Rather than attempting to consider a game in its totality, we can ask a narrower question: how does mytholudics help us understand *heroism* in these games?

The hero-types at the beginning of the chapter help with the comparative function of this method. Since they are an analytical aid and not the central point of the chapter, they are not exhaustive. Rather, they help to group prevalent decentralised motifs and themes that revolve around particular heroic constructions. The hero-types initially laid out are the *hero-victim*, the *hero-sceptic*, the *preordained hero* and the *unsung hero*. Of these, the first three centre on from where heroism is said to arise.

For the *hero-victim*, heroism arises from a person in dire circumstances either going above and beyond in service of their comrades or in stoically carrying on with their duties in the face of horror.

The *hero-sceptic* finds their heroism in taking on established wisdoms and knowledge institutions, refusing to accept the ‘official’ explanation and instead finding out the truth for themselves, often at great risk to themselves. It is the pursuit of truth as a rational ideal against the tainting and manipulation of truth by authorities.

The *preordained hero* (alternatively the *hero of bloodline*, *prophecy* or *fate*) is a type where heroism is in some way inherent or bestowed on one by a higher power. It is not something one can rise to in exceptional circumstances. This type presupposes heroism as something that exists independent of heroes as a function or even a spirit of some kind. The spirit inhabits or the function is fulfilled by a person, who is then the hero, even prior to the performance of any heroic acts. Heracles, for example, as the son of Zeus, was never *not* going to be a hero. In some sense, then, this could be considered the ‘most mythical’ type, not only because it is often found in stories we typically think of as mythic, but also because its heroism is by definition precontextual and noncontingent—the mythology exists *prior* to any specific story or event.

The *unsung hero* works in two ways and is therefore a little different to the other three. As a hero-type in itself, it refers to a retrospective ‘uncovering’ of past heroism that had gone overlooked or misinterpreted. Person *x* is an unsung hero because they *were* a hero but were not recognised as such. The *unsung hero* presupposes heroism, rather than specifying its origin. In this way, it can sit on top of other hero-types. This *unsung hero* was a *hero-victim*,

for example—a case that will come up often in new stories of soldiers from a conflict like World War One. *Unsung hero* can also function as a partial of other hero-types, where RISK~CONSEQUENCE=HERO IS.FORGOTTEN~MISATTRIBUTED~VILIFIED. This appears in tropes of the hero acting heroically with the knowledge that they will or can never be recognised for it, for whatever reason.

I more closely examined five examples: the *Call of Duty* and *Assassin's Creed* series, *Skyrim*, *Heaven's Vault* and *Horizon Zero Dawn*. Examining each with this mytholudic approach and a lens of heroism yielded some expected and some surprising interpretations.

As would be expected, *Call of Duty* leans very heavily on the *hero-victim* construction:

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A1. INNOCENT.SOLDIER IS.ORDERED TO:WARZONE
→ A2. SQUAD IS.ABANDONED~BETRAYED~UNREACHABLE
    BY:SUPERIOR.AUTHORITY
B. INNOCENT.SOLDIER RISKS SELF TO:SAVE SQUAD~INNOCENT.CIVILIANS AND
    COMPLETE:OBJECTIVES
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This decentralised theme describes the role of the heroes in all *Call of Duty* campaign plotlines. What is surprising is that this construction holds up both for low-ranking, ordinary, perhaps conscripted soldiers (in World War Two, for instance) as well as for professional, elite soldiers. Perhaps the main point of contention in that aspect is INNOCENT as a partial. It is of course easier to describe conscripts in World War Two as innocent than it is professional, elite SAS soldiers or CIA operatives. For the elite soldiers the INNOCENT aspect comes in more strongly through a careful handling of the politics of war. Great care is taken to not pin the soldiers to specific political outlooks. This is done by fictionalising conflicts that would be controversial if associated explicitly with real-world conflicts. For example, the invasion of Iraq by the US and its allies is clearly inspiration for *Call of Duty 4*'s campaign, but in the gameworld the conflict is in a fictional Middle Eastern country with fictional characters. The political context behind upheavals is also not typically given. We do not know the circumstances of the coup in this Middle Eastern country, nor are we let in on the actual ideology of the Russian Ultranationalists in the *Modern Warfare* subseries' other plot. Of the *Call of Duty* settings, only WWII is allowed to remain specific.

The Cold War is used, but only as part of the *Black Ops* subseries—the covert operations provide plenty of space for additional, fictional justification, leaning more on an *unsung hero* construction. The difficulties I discuss in the *Call of Duty* section in creating a *Call of Duty: Vietnam* exemplify the political structure of the series: the ‘good guys’ must win, and the player must be able to be a hero. Fostering heroism is difficult when the game cannot justify the conflict to the player in clean-cut terms. This is easy for WWII, but requires much more abstraction and adaptation for most other conflicts. In this way, even elite soldiers can escape the political ramifications of their involvement in more controversial conflicts, because they are either involved in less ambiguous real conflicts, or in real conflicts adapted and abstracted to be less ambiguous. With this backdrop, war is presented as inevitable and eternal, rather than as the avoidable culmination of political choices. As such, we are encouraged to focus less on the political context of the conflict and more on the immediate, pitiable circumstances of the soldiers we control and their comrades—fertile ground for the *hero-victim*.

While the elite soldier is in this way let in on the innocence of the conscript, so too is the conscript let in on the immense prowess of the elite soldier. Even as a lowly private in WWII, our playable figure can blast through scores of enemies. And if we fail to, well, we respawn and have another go. The mode of agency that the game wants the player to embody is quite clearly laid out in the structure of gameplay. The player has all the affordances necessary to be a one-man army who can heroically come to the rescue of their squad and who can persevere to complete their objective, and the easy reset function of respawning should they fail. In these ways, *Call of Duty* displays a remarkably stable model of heroism that persists through various means across settings real and fictional and soldiers professional and conscripted, finely tuning each aspect to make them more plausibly fit with this *hero-victim* model.

*Call of Duty*'s heroic construction revolves around this depoliticisation of the soldier. If the soldier is politicised, then their heroism is contingent on one's perspective on the conflict. Instead, *Call of Duty* soldiers are depicted as having choice only within the limited scope of the immediate mission, with most choices simply being optional paths to 'additional' heroism, such as the Heroic Actions in *Call of Duty: WWII*. These choices do not extend to the higher levels of political agency. Ultimately, the series is *Call of Duty*: you are there to answer that call and perform your duty, not to *make* that call. Within this, the *Call of Duty* soldier has only the opportunity to fulfil and rise above and beyond the call of duty. However, my analyses show that what appears to be a straightforward series in terms of analysis is highly varied, even if it has a relatively stable semantic centre. Each subseries takes its own path to the *hero-victim*, and these nuances would be worth exploring in more depth.

*Assassin's Creed*, like *Call of Duty*, is a long-running series with many entries by now. This of course means that there are many aspects I have not been able to touch on. However, like *Call of Duty*, *Assassin's Creed* appears to have a relatively stable semantic centre in the form of its *hero-sceptic* heroic construction. Interestingly, however this is a *hero-sceptic* that is also strongly coloured by a *preordained hero* facet within a science fiction frame. The series' science fiction setting introduces layers of complexity, but in the main, an *Assassin's Creed* game proceeds as such:

- A1. TEMPLARS SEEK PIECES.OF.EDEN (TO:CONTROL.HUMANITY)
  - A2. ASSASSINS SEEK PIECES.OF.EDEN (TO:STOP:TEMPLARS)
  - A3. TEMPLARS AND ASSASSINS SEEK GENETIC.PROGENY
    - [TO:FIND:PIECES.OF.EDEN]
- B1. G.P ENTERS:ANIMUS
  - [B2. GENETIC.ANCESTOR=ASSASSIN]
- C1. G.A FIGHTS [CONTEMPORARY.]TEMPLARS
  - C2. TEMPLARS USE PIECE.OF.EDEN
  - C3. G.A DEFEATS TEMPLARS
- D. G.P FINDS PIECE.OF.EDEN

This describes the top-level framing narrative, the modern-day Assassin-Templar conflict, which frames whatever the historical events within the Animus are as information harvesting. From the perspective of the modern-day conflict, we don't really care about the Viking

invasion of Britain and so on. That's all 'priced into' history already. What we care about are the gaps, specifically the information pertinent to the Pieces of Eden.

This seems curious and at odds with most of the games' marketing and reception. Hype is almost exclusively directed towards which historical setting will feature in the next game. For example, the first reveal of *Valhalla* (2020) took the form of an over 8-hour livestream during which artist BossLogic gradually produced a digital artwork of Eivor in a Viking setting. The first listed 'key feature' in the video description tellingly reads, "WRITE YOUR VIKING SAGA" (Ubisoft North America, 2020). In fact, *none* of the key features listed there mention the framing narrative at all. "In Assassin's Creed® Valhalla, you are Eivor, a fierce Viking warrior raised on tales of battle and glory" (Ubisoft North America, 2020), they write. 'But', says the *Assassin's Creed* aficionado, 'that's not true! In *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* you are Layla using the Animus to access the *memories* of Eivor!' Clearly, the marketing team do not care at all about the framing narrative. And this does not reflect some waning in popularity of change in focus over the long course of the franchise; Ubisoft has had an awkward relationship with the framing narrative since the first game. In a discussion regarding the Animus with a number of the development team, Nicolas Cantin, pre-production art director and art director for cinematics, said that "marketing was a little big cold about the idea ... because if you want to sell a medieval game, do people want to go back in time and realize that it's not the true experience?", and as a result the first E3 trailer focused more on the setting than the framing narrative (Moss, 2018). We cannot know what happens in the parallel universe where marketing went all-in on the Animus, but it is fair to say that marketing's decision wasn't a failure, with the series now Ubisoft's largest property. Marketing's approach *does* seem to reflect the fact that the players also do not, generally speaking, care about the modern frame, which has only been scaled back in recent entries. So why should you or I care about it here in these analyses?

I discuss in the chapter *Assassin's Creed*'s particular mode of allohistorical speculation. This mode is not so much alternate history as it is 'yes, and' history. It pitches history not as incorrect, nor does it highlight the paths not taken, how easily things could have gone differently, and so on. Rather, it contends that there are additional layers to every history you think you know, and that these layers always operate on a higher, grander level than the historical event itself. The Viking invasion of Britain happened and is important. *But* really the most important aspect is what Eivor was doing and how she came across a Piece of Eden. Even if we don't care about the framing narrative, it still guides the game, tinging it with a conspiratorial mode that invites us to always think *beyond* the current historical circumstance. The frame structures the rest of the game: why else would *Assassin's Creed II* end in a fist fight with Pope Alexander VI if not for his unveiled role in some omnihistorical conspiracy? There is no contingent, historical context in which this series of events would make any sense at all. So, the modern framing situates us in a conspiratorial mode. This kind of setting is made for a *hero-sceptic*, one who fearlessly uncovers the truth in spite of malicious and manipulative authorities.

However, this *hero-sceptic* construction is not quite so straightforward. Because of the omnihistorical nature of the Assassin–Templar conflict, we are not really unveiling anything that is not already known to those familiar with the conspiracy. The sceptical mode is no

doubt present—this conspiracy is still unfamiliar to us as a player, and the playable figure is typically on the forefront, uncovering new developments—but there is something else at play here. This is found in the way the Animus works, via the user’s genetic memories. This becomes a scientification of the *preordained hero*, where a prophecy or destiny is replaced by genetics, by lineage, which due to this rationale, there is only one person who can be the hero. *Assassin’s Creed* in this way represents a curious mixture of the *hero-sceptic* and *preordained hero*. Intuitively, these types should not work well together, one being founded in a championing of scientific, rational views of the world—heroism comes from the fearless search for rational truth in spite of corrupt knowledge institutions—and the other in some usually mystical ‘transferral’ of heroism via divine intervention or lineage. By mixing these, *Assassin’s Creed*’s model of heroism fits both in a rational, sceptical, scientific worldview while also drawing from the grandness of transcendental mythologies of religious and fantastical heroism. Like with *Call of Duty*, we have a stable model of heroism that serves as the basis for all games. A unifying structure as the basis for a number of different storylines, settings and contexts. A particular model of heroism in both these series serves as an anchor offering a sense of unity between the otherwise disparate settings.

Aloy in *Horizon Zero Dawn* is remarkably similar. Aloy is also both a *hero-sceptic* on the surface who is gradually revealed as a *preordained hero*, one which is technologized and rationalised. In contrast to *Assassin’s Creed* though, the gameworld in *Horizon* is not conspiratorial but postapocalyptic. Following the apocalyptic event, the gameworld is organised into tribes who form various competing knowledge institutions, each offering theories on the apocalypse as well as the Derangement, a new development whereby the robotic fauna of the world has turned hostile. With the apocalyptic event happening in a near future with respect to our current society, *we* are the ones being mythologised by the various tribes. We control Aloy as she defies the various knowledge institutions to discover the truth about *us*. This fosters an interesting dynamic, whereby we can to a large extent verify Aloy’s findings. When she offers her hypothesis on Studious Palas’ ‘ritual cups’, we are able to confirm that she is correct to think of them as ordinary drinking cups, though this confirmation stays with us as players and does not penetrate the gameworld. In this way, the *hero-sceptic* is in some sense turned upside down. Rather than a Sherlockesque experience of being outpaced by the hero in the complex unwrapping of the mystery at hand, we are instead several steps ahead of Aloy. She is still a *hero-sceptic* within her world—and the contrast between her and others is stark—but the player is usually a step or two ahead. Information that seems alien to Aloy and requires decoding is immediately clear to us. This heightens the sense of inevitability in Aloy’s sceptical journey. Because we can confirm her findings along the way, we are never in doubt about whether she is mistaken or being misled.

This inevitability then strongly supports Aloy’s other hero-type, the *preordained hero*. Like in *Assassin’s Creed*, prophecy or fate is explained by science and technology. The Nora tribe’s explanation for Aloy is in this way not entirely wrong—the decentralised motifs are all correct. The divine forces in their explanation are just replaced by AI. Aloy is a clone of revered Old One scientist, Elisabet Sobeck, whose genetic imprint is necessary for Aloy’s quest to succeed. The hero *could not have been* anyone else, not because of divine preordination, but because of genetics, as in *Assassin’s Creed*. In this way, the inevitability injected into

the *hero-sceptic* aspect of Aloy supports the preordination. That we are never in doubt about whether she will figure out the crisis reciprocally supports that she is the *preordained hero*.

This kind of inevitability and preordination is also a key aspect of *Skyrim*'s heroic construction. The playable figure as the Dragonborn is inherently heroic and part of a prophecy to destroy the great evil. But perhaps the greatest reason for *Skyrim*'s success is not its inevitability but the opposite, its freedom and openness. Players can play as any of the game-world's races, any class, any combat style, can join most factions, take different sides, marry, build a house and so on and so on. How does this square with the inevitability of preordination? The prophecy begins as such:

- A. ELDER.SCROLLS~AKAVIRI.WISEMEN PROPHESE WORLD-EATER AND  
LAST.DRAGONBORN
- B. WORLD-EATER.ALDUIN EMERGES
- C. PLAYABLE.FIGURE DISCOVERS THEY=LAST.DRAGONBORN

However, where we would expect the defeat of Alduin to then be if this were a saga is instead implicit and immanent: [{D. LAST.DRAGONBORN DEFEATS WORLD-EATER.ALDUIN}]. The performative quest structure of the openworld game doesn't *negate* the preordination of prophecy, it *defers* it indefinitely. The kairotic time of the game supports this, allowing the player to actualise imminent motifs if and when they choose to. Strangely, this only enhances the inevitability of the prophecy because the player cannot *fail* to fulfil it. At 'worst' they never get round to it and stop playing, but within the gameworld the quest is not failed, only still deferred.

The centrality of heroism in *Skyrim* is also foregrounded by the apparent diversity of choice one can make. Players can normally choose totally opposing sides of a faction or conflict with opposing outcomes. Between each choice however is a symmetry. Typically, although the outcome is the same, the mode of heroism is stable. Both final quests of the Civil War proceed in exactly the same manner as a decentralised theme, but different names fill in the slots depending on which side the player chose. This highlights also the inevitability of heroism, as well as the noncontingency of it: it does not *matter* what the player chooses, the Dragonborn *is* the hero and ultimately resolves the conflict by their heroism.

*Heaven's Vault* has been praised for being a much more authentic portrayal of archaeology than depictions of the Indiana Jones mould. No doubt this is true, but a mytholudic examination of the game's heroism reveals that there is still a strong mythoheroic construction of the playable figure, Aliya. Aliya fits well into the *hero-sceptic* type. She comes from a different background and holds different values—most notably being nonreligious—which helps her to see things her colleagues cannot. The knowledge institution proves unable to solve the Nebula's issue because of its religious blinders. Unshackled from that, Aliya discovers the truth with only her robot companion Six. While I argue contrary to Draycott, that this *does* constitute Aliya as a "lone polymathic hero" (2022, p. 349), there are important caveats to that, such as the fact that Aliya does need to visit others for their knowledge. The bulk of the work and in particular the risk to self is taken on by Aliya, however.

Although this seems a quite straightforward *hero-sceptic*, elements of the *preordained hero* seem to sneak in. For example, a key discovery is made by the unexpected similarity

between the undeciphered Ancient and Aliya's native Elboreth patois. There is a sense there that the hero could not have been other than Aliya due to her innate abilities. However, although Aliya's position in the university is unique, her ability to speak an ordinary language is not. This discovery is perhaps better understood as serendipity rather than preordination. After all, it would not be unthinkable in the gameworld that a non-Elborethean Aliya could have instead discovered the similarity from a speaker of the patois. Ancient also does not hold any special, divine or magical power in itself, rather, in a more sceptical mode, it is a key to *understanding*:

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ALIYA DECIPHERS ANCIENT.LANGUAGE
→ ALIYA UNDERSTANDS ANCIENT.CIVILISATION USING:ANCIENT.LANGUAGE
→ ALIYA DISCOVERS TRUTH USING:KNOWLEDGE.OF:ANCIENT.CIVILISATION

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*Heaven's Vault* shows us a relatively straightforward mythologisation of the *hero-sceptic*. The mythologisation appears quite successful at remaining under the radar, as the game has received much praise for being a more accurate and authentic portrayal of archaeology. This assessment is not untrue, but neglects to note the heroification of Aliya. An archaeologist whose unique scepticism amongst their colleagues allows them to save the world is clearly not commonly seen amongst real archaeologists. Something which both supports this heroification as a *hero-sceptic* but *also* is genuinely more 'authentic' is the structure of gameplay and quests. Rather than the swashbuckling, life-imperilling athleticism of a Lara Croft or an Indiana Jones, Aliya's illudic and perludic acts (Jayemanne, 2017, pp. 241–243) are about investigation, analysis and systematisation. This simultaneously makes her feel less heroic—perhaps because of the contrast to preexisting hero-archaeologist paradigms—while also firmly supporting her *hero-sceptic* construction.

What patterns and observations emerge from these examples together, albeit acknowledging that they are not representative nor exhaustive? We could visualise some basic connections as such:

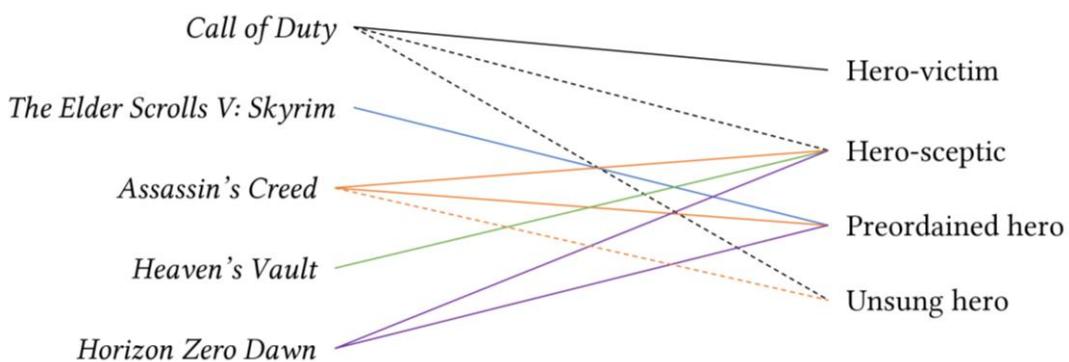


Figure 12. Visualisation of the hero-types employed in each example analysed. Solid lines refer to the hero-types that are part of the game's semantic centre; dotted lines refer to hero-types that are present but less prevalent or central than another.

One point that arises is the stickiness of the *preordained hero*. Despite moves particularly in recent years to configure an everyday hero, whereby anyone can be a hero so long as they rise to the circumstances, many of the most popular and acclaimed games still feature a *preordained hero*, even in genres where we might not expect one. Rather than the rational,

scientific outlook dispensing with the *preordained hero* as mystical, magical, superstitious nonsense, science fiction actually seems to be fertile ground for reconfiguring the *preordained hero* along technoscientific lines. The rationalist drive to explain things actually results in elaborate explanations for which this hero-type *could* still exist under a paradigm of scientism. AI, genetics, virtual reality, cloning are all ways of allowing the *preordained hero*, more traditionally the stuff of gods and fantasy, to continue thriving. Although it may intuitively seem at odds with the *hero-sceptic*, the two actually make good bedfellows. From the examples of *Assassin's Creed* and *Horizon Zero Dawn*, it seems that what we want is a *hero-sceptic* construction to provide the overall justification for heroism and a guide for the events of the game, but for the hero to be constructed by rationally explained, technoscientific pre-ordination. Of course, these are only two examples. But they are two very successful and prominent examples.

This is perhaps because the *preordained hero* traditionally found a modality in religion and fantasy, but not a root cause. Jennings' (2022) analysis of *Horizon Zero Dawn* as a world-saviour monomyth suggests to me a more likely grounding for the *preordained hero* in authoritarianism. Jennings discusses "heroic authoritarianism" in terms of "singular individuals capable of bringing salvation to imperiled universes" (2022, p. 329), and this seems true of the *preordained hero*. The benevolent dictator is an appealing fantasy: some hero to come and clean up all our messes for us. But this is not one that is easy to admit to. The *hero-sceptic* seems to appeal strongly to some of the dominant mythologies of today, revolving around science, empiricism and rationality, while the *preordained hero* perhaps speaks more to tradition, nostalgia and spirituality. These pull apart in somewhat different directions. The secular sceptic champions the ability for people who consider things critically to find the truth, but this faces the anxiety of doing without a belief in a higher power or some force of destiny, the notion that something greater than us has things under control. In this way, secular mythologies of rationalism, empiricism and scientism find that they must mimic the forms of religious and spiritual mythologies in order to supplant them.

With the other examples, we see a more monoheroic approach. *Call of Duty*'s heroic mythologies come quite directly from the *hero-victim* model made especially prevalent in the wake of the mechanised horrors of WWI, in contrast to the supposed glory of ages past. *Call of Duty* is interesting in how it navigates different settings and different kinds of soldiers in fitting this type, as well as in fitting the victimisation of the type in with the illudic and perludic acts of the first-person shooter. However, this is also at times supported by the *unsung hero* as either a risk or consequence of the soldier's heroism—particularly in the *Black Ops* subseries—and the *hero-sceptic* as a way of deflecting potential criticisms regarding the overly positive depiction of the 'good guys'—they too are sometimes beset by conspiracy and betrayal. Notably also, of my examples it is only *Call of Duty* that constructs a *hero-victim*.

*Heaven's Vault* is relatively straightforward in its application of the *hero-sceptic* type, but serves as an illuminating example of heroic mythologisation in less bombastic, nonviolent, more academic, more 'authentic' settings. *Skyrim* is similarly a relatively straightforward *preordained hero* model, but the example helps to see how such rigid concepts embedded in that type like fate and predestination can mix with and even be facilitated by a very open gameworld filled with what seems like endless choice and potentiality. The *preordained hero*

provides foundation on which symmetrical choices are built. A single, strong hero-type allows for a semantic centre that can leave more slack elsewhere in the system.

Mytholudics helps to understand how these examples work through all aspects of the game to produce mythic constructions. The hero lens focuses us on the mythologisations of the ideal. What forces do these games propose as saving us from our great evils? How are those forces constituted, and where do they come from? We find, as expected, a variety of ways. But, more surprisingly, we find some of the complex and unintuitive ways these structures are adapted and intertwined. We trace mythological lineages, revealing the expected and unexpected heritages from which these games draw. In them, we can see what heroic mythologies mean to us today, what they do for us, and how we are exploring them in games.

# 6 MONSTERS

Ted Bundy, Smaug, Sulley, Cthulhu, Grendel, Alien, Predator, Frankenstein's monster, Count Dracula, the Yick Cheong Building, Jeff Bezos. These are all called 'monsters', and yet they seem to share very few characteristics, if any. What they share is a reason for being called a monster. 'Monster' is a category that is always based on difference, opposition, projection, reflection. A particular monster is a manifestation of that. *Monster* is therefore a discursive concept: monsters do not exist prior to their being labelled a monster.

In this chapter, I examine the role of the ever-present monster in games through this mytholudic approach. What that entails is an exploration of how mythology operates with regards to difference, otherness and the reflection of cultural anxieties. What kinds of monsters do we face in games? How is that monstrosity rendered in the digital environments of games? What is the monster's role in relation to the player? I have established mythology as in part a process of framing, including and then naturalising a connection between a number of elements, while silently excluding other potential groupings and connections. In this way, the monster as a product of mythologisation works to embody many of the negative associations that a given group, culture or society wants to establish.

To do this, I first elaborate on what I mean by *monster* and *monstrosity* more precisely through a review of the pertinent theory on monsters. Then, I examine how monstrosity in games more specifically has been theorised. Following that, I set out four distinct monster-types, four mythologies of monstrosity that link together a wide variety of particular monster depictions. These are not individual myths, but constellations of myths that orbit a reason for some entity's reason for being discursivised as a monster. These types are not intended to be exhaustive. Rather, they allow us to begin from afar and gradually zoom in. With those laid out, I examine a number of games, zooming in on how specific games or game series configure their mythologies of monstrosity.

## 6.1 Monster theory

That monsters spring from difference is a central tenet of monster theory. This is largely based on an etymology of the term that many theorists return to. In expanding on his thesis that "the monster's body is a cultural body" (1996, p. 4), Jeffrey Jerome Cohen explains:

The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically "that which reveals," "that which warns," a glyph that seeks a hierophant. Like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself: it is always a displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again. (1996, p. 4)

The etymological point Cohen raises here has become a touchstone for many monster theorists. Stephen T. Asma, for example, also traces the term's Latin root in *monēre*, arguing that

therefore “to be a monster is to be an omen” (2012, p. 13). “The monster … is a kind of *cultural category*”, he claims (2012, p. 13).

If a monster is a manifestation of a warning or an omen, it must be warning *against* something, some perceived or potential threat. This is where the crucial notion of difference enters. The monster reflects culture precisely by being *different* from it. That can be bodily, for example. Margrit Shildrick states that “monsters challenge and resist normative human being, in the first instance by their aberrant corporeality” (2002, p. 9). Dana Oswald similarly remarks that “the monster is always read against the bodies of those who are not monstrous” (2010, p. 2). In part, then, the monster is seen as that which is against nature.

The idea of the *monster of excess* is also prevalent particularly in medieval studies, leveraged insightfully by Oswald when talking about the figure of the giant:

The giant is both the norm against which all men are measured (and found lacking) and abnormal because of his impossible excess. If, as Judith Butler suggests, bodies are manifestations of dominant social codes, then the giant figures as simultaneously the code itself and the Other against which the code is defined. (2010, p. 161)

In this way, many monsters actually represent *ideals* of society, but demonstrate that those ideals can be taken to an undesirable excess. They prove in their aberrant existence the need for that idealised trait to have limits in society. Physical strength has (for better or worse) long been a championed masculine trait, but displays of *excessive* physical strength can be uncomfortable, gross, off-putting, scary. And this can go beyond the physical or bodily too. We are all encouraged to hoard wealth in the form of savings. This is prudent, responsible household finances, we are told. But wealth hoarded to *excess*, as with billionaires or dragons, becomes uncomfortable, immoral and terrifying in the eyes of many—monstrous.

These ideas of the monster as embodying difference and excess come back to some of Cohen’s other famous theses: “The Monster Is the Harbinger of Category Crisis” (1996, p. 6); “The Monster Dwells at the Gates of Difference” (1996, p. 7); and “The Monster Polices the Borders of the Possible” (1996, p. 12). A cultural understanding of the monster places it on the border of sociocultural norms, values and ideals. The monster shows us what goes too far, what is horrifying but unnervingly close to us, what aspects of ourselves and of society we wish to cast out. In doing so, it reminds us of the fragility and arbitrariness of these norms, values and ideals.

Along similar lines to the notion of difference, poststructuralist and psychoanalytic approaches to monsters are founded on Julia Kristeva’s concept of the *abject*. The abject is “the place where meaning collapses” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 2), it is a subject encountering something that threatens the boundaries of the self, which exists as “neither subject nor object” (1982, p. 1). The monster is an example of the abject for Kristeva, and her ideas have been developed greatly within monster theory. Barbara Creed, for example, observes that many of the other examples Kristeva uses—in particular “sexual immorality and perversion; corporeal alteration, decay and death; human sacrifice; murder; the corpse; bodily wastes; the feminine body and incest”—are “central to the construction of the monstrous in the modern horror film” (1993, p. 9). Here she is referring to now-classic monsters like the zombie and the vampire,

which embody several of these aspects at once. In the monsters we are confronted with that which we find loathsome for challenging the boundaries of our self or our society, and which yet exists nonetheless— spitefully, almost. So the abject too is predicated on difference, boundaries and liminality. As Jakobsson observes in medieval Icelandic sagas, “the harder it becomes to classify or name a monster, the more powerful it is” (2011, p. 286).

As a discursive process then, monstrosity and mythologisation can overlap. A particular process of mythologisation can be precisely to mythologise—to establish, frame and naturalise—something as monstrous. From the creation of one monster, we can find repeated patterns. A particular monster myth can repeat, generating from it new monsters which share a core mythologisation. Just as the mythological blueprint for Sherlock Holmes can be later found in Dr. Gregory House, so too can we see a common core shared between Frankenstein’s monster and Geralt from *The Witcher* (as I examine later). But the monster is also in some way problematic for myth. If mythology is about establishing models for understanding the world and things in it, then monsters as boundary-blurring harbingers of category crises would seem to challenge that model, to problematise its construction. In this way, the mythologisation of the monster can also be tautological justification for its own mythologisation. Barthes notes that tautology is one of the “principal figures” of myth (1972/2009, pp. 178, 180), and here we can see that at work: the mythologisation of an entity into a monster naturalises the idea that this entity causes a category crisis, which must then be resolved by a mythological structure which categorises and contains the monster, or vanquishes it.

Like myth, monsters are often mistakenly seen as something *of* the past that we have somehow ‘lost’. Peter J. Dendle puts the question:

Is the case so cut and dry, though, that people used to believe in monsters—especially in the pre-modern period—but that now we know better? Are “monsters” the definitive provenance of the Other, and belief in them a hallmark of quaintness, superstition, or ignorance? The question is partially semantic and partially empirical, but it is anything but cut and dry. Many people, though not all, believed in monsters in the pre-modern world; many, though not all, believe in them today. Certainly, if society is losing most of its traditional monsters, some subcultures are not letting go of them without a fight. (2013/2017, p. 570)

Why, in Dendle’s perception, is it perhaps the case that “society losing most of its traditional monsters”? Primarily, rationalisation and commodification. He points to the encyclopedic approach of *Dungeons & Dragons*, which he argues “has a flattening and demythologizing effect for creatures whose power ostensibly lies in their mystery” (2013/2017, p. 569). Indian gods are catalogued alongside dragons, kobolds, bears, mammoths and men, each given the same set of numerical attributes. Even if the gods are stronger and better than other creatures, they are fundamentally ‘the same’ in light of having a health bar, even if they have more hitpoints. “When all the angels and demons, gods and ghosts of world religions and folklores are reduced to game pawns, where then is there room for a more authentic sense of the ‘monstrous’ in the contemporary world?”, Dendle asks (2013/2017, p. 570). Monsters are also commodified. Once-terrifying monsters are rendered cute mascots for

advertisement. “In a largely secular and self-conscious age, the forms of monstrous past are infantilized, commoditized, and incorporated into the kitsch icons of leisure and entertainment” (2013/2017, p. 570). He also notes the psychologization of various forms of monstrosity, whereby certain monsters (such as werewolves or vampires) are explained by scientific means (2013/2017, pp. 570–571). ‘What was thought of as lycanthropy is *actually* caused by such and such condition which may make people act in this or that way, which would be very scary and misunderstood by the stupid, superstitious people of the past’.

Dendle continues with an interesting observation:

All of these attempts to render the folkloric “rational” by providing scientific explanations have met with formidable criticism, but the more interesting point for our purposes is that for the modern secular world, there is still an apparent need for monsters to be “real.” People devote significant attention to “saving” the deities of the monster pantheon, as it were, by euhemerizing them. (2013/2017, p. 571)

In other words, we don’t use science and rationality to explain *away* monsters, but to explain how they *can still exist* within our modern frameworks. Of course, there are plenty who claim that ‘Bigfoot does not exist’, but there are also plenty searching for scientific explanations for why Bigfoot *does* exist, such as the oft-repeated hypothesis that Bigfoot sightings are actually sightings of a relict population of a species of southeast Asian ape thought to be extinct, *Gigantopithecus blacki* (beginning with Tschernezky, 1960). Megalodon enjoys similar scientific speculation (see Guimont, 2021). A recent National Geographic ‘docuseries’ titled *Atlas of Cursed Places* (Glover, 2020), according to its description on the Disney+ website, “employs cutting-edge science” (*Atlas of Cursed Places*, 2020, sec. Details) to explain monsters and myths, including the lost city of Atlantis, Dracula and a voodoo priestess in the Bayou. The tone of this series, in my estimation at least, is very much focused on stretching any kind of empirical evidence, no matter how tentative, contested or marginal, as far as it will go to conclude in the end that the eponymous mythical ‘curse’ is, in some way, real. Rather than *demythologising* monsters, as Dendle puts it, this seems to me a *remythologisation* whereby longstanding mythic integers are being configured into new motifs, themes and relations according to changes occurring in the broader mythological landscape.

If monsters represent cultural anxieties, what does this remythologisation of longstanding monsters do? In part, it remythologises the monster *as such*. The monster becomes less of a sublime, unfathomable being and more a natural phenomenon that we do not *yet* understand (the implication being that it *is* comprehensible). This can perhaps be seen in the predominant encyclopedic mode of monstrosity, in which encountering the monster entails not banishing or destroying it immediately, but understanding and cataloguing it first. The monster is treated as any other unexplored natural phenomenon. This impetus is not new but finds a very comfortable seat at the table of scientism. In this way, mythologies of rationality and empiricism can remythologise monsters by disenchantment, seeking to refigure their unfathomability into a not-yet-fathomed-ness. Importantly, though, this process of epistemically containing the monster never calls into question its monstrosity as such. The

assumption of some fundamental otherness is only reinforced. If anything, a catalogued monster becomes more monstrous, not less.

## Monsters and morality

What is the relationship between monsters and morality? This is a key question in establishing what constitutes monstrosity and is one that at first appears ambiguous. Morality appears to be one of the key aspects in the monstrification of people. That is, Ted Bundy is construed as a monster because of evilness and the heinousness of his actions. Or, rather, as we shall see in the section on monster types, construing Ted Bundy as a monster is one *explanation* for why he committed those acts. Why does one do evil things? Because they are fundamentally not human, a monster, even if they appear human, is one explanation. Foucault remarks that the human monster—like Bundy—is in this way fundamentally a construction of law, and that within that paradigm “the monster is the limit, both the point at which law is overturned and the exception that is found only in extreme cases. The monster combines the impossible and the forbidden” (2003, p. 56). The human monster is one who does forbidden things to a seemingly impossible extent. “The monster’s power and its capacity to create anxiety are due to the fact that it violates the law while leaving it with nothing to say” (2003, p. 56). No legal response seems sufficient or appropriate, and the seeming impossibility of the act or acts prompting an ontological reconsideration: can they *really* be *human*? This legal dimension is interesting to consider in terms of morality. The relationship between the law and morality is a vast topic and one that I could not hope to treat sufficiently here.<sup>39</sup> And, crucially, Foucault did not see the law as a reflection or codification of morality (see Hunt & Wickham, 1994; Turkel, 1990). But the association remains colloquially nonetheless. On a pragmatic level, to each of us subjectively, we know that there are laws which proscribe moral behaviour just as there is immoral behaviour that is not proscribed. Indeed, we may see some immoral acts that are *required* of us by law.<sup>40</sup> But there is still the lurking presumption that law does or should reflect moral codes. And, I would argue, especially so in the very acts which seem most likely to produce ‘monsters’. To Foucault’s point, it is when the acts are considered so heinous that the law *fails to apply morality sufficiently* in our perception—in large part because these acts are so evil that, for many, they *cannot* be rectified morally. There is no penance that makes up for it, and rehabilitation seems far too kind. When law has no answer to questions of morality, that is when a monster is produced in this Foucauldian sense. As we shall see in the section on *Doom*, there is also often an association

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<sup>39</sup> This question centres around the *Overlap Thesis*, the view that there is a necessary relationship between law and morality. Natural law, in legal theory, accepts the Overlap Thesis to at least some degree, contending that there is some objective morality (whether derived from the divine, human nature or what have you) and that laws are only truly laws insofar as they adhere to those morals. Schools of thought like legal positivism, by contrast, reject the Overlap Thesis, asserting that the law is socially constructed and does not rely on ethical justification. (See Himma, n.d.-a, n.d.-b, n.d.-c.)

<sup>40</sup> For example, as much as I vehemently disagree with them, anti-abortion activists in the US may have seen the rulings of *Roe v. Wade* and *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* as requiring medical professionals to conduct immoral procedures, creating a moral imperative to have it overturned in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*. Likewise, extreme libertarians may see the requirement by law to pay taxes to be an immoral legal imposition.

between the monsters we encounter and the evil places they come from. Demons come from Hell, and we know Hell to be a place of evil, therefore demons are evil.

However, we can also see monstrosity in cases of at least more ambiguous morality. The Talus in *Breath of the Wild* are considered “monsters” in the game’s bestiary, but they do not appear to have any malintent, evil corruption or cruelty, they simply attack if the player gets too close, and do not give chase when the player runs away (Ford, 2019a, pp. 55–61). They can be hunted in the game for lucrative rewards and as part of quests, but no justification is ever given for killing them, and they appear to have no relation to Calamity Ganon’s corrupting pollution. Perhaps this is unique to games, which have commodified and fully contained monstrosity. The legal, moral and philosophical definition of *monster* seems to be replaced or destabilised in games by an additional, purely ludic definition. In the first *Dungeons & Dragons Monster Manual* that both Jaroslav Švelch (2013, 2018) and Sarah Stang and Aaron Trammel (2019) cite as foundational for game monsters, ‘monster’ is defined as such:

Its first, and most important, meaning is to designate *any* creature encountered—hostile or otherwise, human, humanoid, or beast. Until the encountering part determines what they have come upon, it is a *monster*. The secondary usage of the term is in the usual sense: a horrible or wicked creature of some sort. (Gygax, 1979, p. 5)

Not just a relic of the early days of fantasy tabletop roleplaying games, more recent editions of the *Monster Manual* repeat this framing:

A monster is defined as any creature that can be interacted with and potentially fought and killed. Even something as harmless as a frog or as benevolent as a unicorn is a monster by this definition. The term also applies to humans, elves, dwarves, and other civilized folk who might be friends or rivals to the player characters. Most of the monsters that haunt the D&D world, however, are threats that are meant to be stopped: rampaging demons, cowering devils, soul-sucking undead, summoned elementals—the list goes on. (Wizards RPG Team, 2014, p. 4)

Monster becomes a programmatic term. In the same way as a ‘child’ and ‘parent’ in object-oriented programming are metaphors (leading to wonderful genuine search queries like ‘how to remove child from parent with fork’), monster is an incidental, metaphorical term to differentiate between two different classes of agents: player and not-player. *Dungeon & Dragons* may not be a computer program, but its logic is programmatic. With this usage, ‘monster’ loses any connection to morality it may have had.

But, as Cohen (1996, pp. 4–6) observes, the monster always returns. *Dungeons & Dragons* may represent the flattening, demythologising urge that Dendle writes about, but even in the dryly programmatic language of the monster manuals, note that it always seems necessary to address the horror and sublimity of the monster, despite the internal contradiction it poses: “the secondary usage of the term is in the usual sense: a horrible or wicked creature of some sort” (Gygax, 1979, p. 5) and “most of the monsters that haunt the D&D world, however, are threats that are meant to be stopped” (Wizards RPG Team, 2014, p. 4). In both cases

there is an appeal to morality: “wicked” or “threats that are meant to be stopped”. Even if the monster in games is just a functional pawn deployed to give the player something to do, there seems to be an urge to justify the player’s quest as righteous. Heroic, perhaps. And that necessitates that the foe is evil.

Monstrosity in games is therefore stretched between this functional, instrumental, programmatic mode of near meaninglessness and the fact that the category crises and boundaries that we have always used the monster to explore are still present and still need exploring. This contradiction manifests in a broad set of monsters only loosely related, but with some underlying accusation regarding morality. Even if the Talus are not evil, they are also not *good*. They are not actively helping us in our righteous quest, and as such pose only a hindrance. The monster is discursivised as such when seen as in opposition to or impediment to our moral quest. As such, the ludic conception of monsters is, as a broad rhetorical move, already an expression of the naturalizing impetus of mythologisation. As systems that impose general, stable rules on a system and a world, rules do away with the categorical uncertainty at heart of traditional heuristics of monsters and replace it with a simple definition: the Other is a monster.

## **Games and monsters**

Much of existing monster theory can carry over relatively straightforwardly to the study of monsters in games. This is in part because games have naturally borrowed so much from other mediums, and in part because monstrosity is itself not contingent on media, rather media is how monstrosity is expressed. However, there are a number of specificities of games as a medium that we must take into consideration. Videogames are fundamentally *computational*, for example, a point Švelch (2013, 2018, 2019, 2020) has written extensively about. Videogames are also (unsurprisingly) ludic. Or, in other words, the monster is almost always faced by *you*, the player, through a playable figure or playable figures, rather than by a protagonist in a novel, for example. This is a point made particularly by Laurie N. Taylor (2006) and Bernard Perron (2018). Various strands of monster theory have been applied to games both digital and nondigital.

Stang is perhaps the most prominent among game scholars who apply the monstrous-feminine to games, arguing that digital games by and large draw from “traditional Western myths, legends, and fairy tales” (2021, p. 210) which perpetuate the deep-seated “cultural fear of feminine power (especially seductive or procreative powers) but also the cultural disgust directed at female bodies” (2021, p. 208) (see also Stang, 2016, 2018a, 2019; Stang & Trammell, 2019; and Blomquist, 2021; Dumas, 2018; Taylor, 2006). These perspectives are rooted in psychoanalytic approaches mostly developed for film studies (especially drawing on Creed, 1993), and so have a tendency to focus on visual aspects (though not without also adapting the theory for games).

Other approaches applying monstrosity to games are a little more scattered in terms of theoretical backing, though Kristeva and the abject remains a key touchstone. I expand on these other approaches when I use them in my analyses.

## Computational monsters

The boundary-blurring, uncanny, abject and perhaps sublime nature attributed to monsters can also be problematised by digital games as a computational medium. This perspective is most clearly outlined by Švelch, who observes a tension between “the *sublime thesis* and *encyclopedic containment*” (2018, p. 10). Drawn from Asma (2012), the sublime thesis posits monsters as terrifying, awe-inspiring and unfathomable. In contrast, encyclopedic containment represents the effort to fathom the sublime monster. Medieval bestiaries are a straightforward, predigital example of this. By cataloguing and iterating our knowledge of the monster, we in some sense ‘contain’ it. It is not as unfathomable as before and therefore not as terrifying. A brief example of this in practice: I find horror games quite difficult to play and *Soma* (Frictional Games, 2015) was no exception. For certain sections, I decided to look up the behaviour of the monster online. Some have extremely poor eyesight but excellent hearing, for instance, so you can walk right in front of it so long as you’re slow and quiet. With that algorithmic knowledge, my fear largely subsided and I progressed without issue. Of course, this strategy does not work as well for every monster, nor for every aspect of monstrosity. The fan wiki for the game will help me learn the monster’s behaviour and tell me details about it, but it does not resolve its uncanniness, creepiness and abjectness. Because of the computational nature of videogames, Švelch argues:

Video games present us with a different kind of monster, a monster that is designed to be confronted and (usually) defeated by the player. Unlike the ideal “sublime” monster, it is encoded in computational systems and well defined in the game’s rules. (2018, p. 1)

Monsters that appear in games (as opposed to those only referenced in dialogue, for example) must have a predetermined, encoded visual appearance, behaviour, stats, attributes and so on. And because all of this is *encoded*, these can all be learned and comprehended by the player. They become puzzles to be solved more so than harbingers of unresolved category crisis.

A later paper of Švelch’s (2019) examines that middle ground between simple puzzle and utter sublimity. Using the splicers in *BioShock* (2K Boston & 2K Australia, 2007) as his focal point, he describes the “computational other”, which is “more than a computational object or process; it is recognized as a partner in interaction” (2019, p. 260). A partner who may appear human, using human speech and so on, but on some level is always acknowledged as fundamentally computational rather than human. This applies to “non-player characters (NPCs) and enemies in video games, but also computer operating systems, or social media bots” (2019, p. 260). The discrepancy between their outwardly-human (or outwardly-natural, in the case of nonhumanoid entities) traits and their computational nature renders them “*impure*” and thus “always ready to be represented as monsters” (2019, p. 260). The discrepancy between the representational level and the computational nature of the rules level is itself a source of discomfort and lays the ground for monstrosity. In some ways, this can be drawn out to the meta level of playing games itself: with digital games, one is always

interacting with and perhaps fighting a computational other, such that the game itself can be construed as a monster.

## 6.2 What makes a monster?

My use of *monsters* and *monstrosity* here is primarily used as a prominent example of and framework for understanding certain kinds of negative mythologisation. While heroes and heroism represent a prominent way of mythologising that which we idealise and aspire towards, monstrosity represents that which we abject, which we want to cast out of society or exclude from our social categories. Monstrosity is not the only form that negative mythologisations take, but they are powerful examples of how mythology crystallises into individuated entities, and as such make a useful counterpart to heroes as well.

A monster, then, is *the mythologisation of an entity into an abject, othered, threatening figure*. Like with the hero, the monster comes to stand for more than their contingent, corporeal being. This mythologisation is in some way negative, infusing the entity with *threat* by naturalising them as *other* to the community. How the monster is dealt with then becomes of central importance, because it represents how the community responds to the symbolic threat that the monster poses. Is the monster killed? Banished? Rehabilitated? Integrated? Accepted? Typically, it is one of the first two, but this is not always the case as some of my examples show.

## 6.3 Monster-types

Mythologisations of something into a monster tend to coalesce around some recognisable, recurring types. As with the hero-types, the types outlined here cover broad trends. That is to say that, firstly, they allow plenty of room for individuation and, secondly, are not exhaustive. These types are based on *the purpose for which a particular entity is made into a monster*. I have established *monster* as a discursive category in that something is a monster to a particular community if community labels it as such. The monster does not exist as an ontological category prior to our categorisation of an entity as such. In this way, mythology plays a central role in shaping the contours of the monster: why they are monstrous, where their monstrosity comes from, and so on. Through these types we can better see a variety of reasons for why and how we make the monsters we make.

### The monster from within

This first type is somewhat self-explanatory: monsters who are seen as coming from within a community, or monstrosity coming from within oneself. This is in contrast to the next type, the *monster from without*, where the monster is seen to incur a community or agent from somewhere else. Phillip Cole in *The Myth of Evil* (2006) outlines four different frameworks that have been used to understand the capacity of humans to be evil or to commit evil acts. One of these he dubs the “monstrous conception” (2006, p. 13), which largely refers to the boundary-blurring aspect of monstrosity I outlined previously. Briefly, the *monstrous conception* is “that some humans can freely and rationally choose to make others suffer purely

because this is what they want to do and for no other end, but these people have crossed the border beyond humanity” (2006, p. 13). Unlike in his other three categories, the monstrous conception is unique in that its evildoers “constitute a distinct class, different from the rest of humanity, with a different *nature*—they are not like you and me” (2006, p. 13). Cole’s monstrous conception here is useful for thinking through how particular agents are mythologised as *monsters from within*. If evil is taken to stem from some inherent monstrosity, then this affects how an entity is constructed as a monster and how they need to be dealt with.

Cole argues that this understanding is ultimately lacking as a philosophically useful way of conceptualising evil because it cannot explain “why certain human beings have a radically different nature to other human beings” (2006, p. 14). As a result, Cole claims that this conception finds more purchase in fiction and folklore. In those realms, the ontological difference can be explained with fictional realities such as the existence of a separate world from which the monsters came. The other arena in which the monstrous conception is prevalent, according to Cole (2006, p. 15), is in popular opinion, political and news media. Criminals in particular—especially murderers, rapists, paedophiles, etc.—are discursivised as being fundamentally *monstrous*. This is both lazy and dangerous. Lazy because it saves us the trouble of understanding how and why these people committed the crimes they did. Dangerous because if these people are seen as fundamentally *not human*, then it follows that they might not be afforded basic human rights.

In terms of mythic discourse, this conception replaces the need for a motive, instead retrospectively applying a different—perhaps fundamentally unfathomable—ontology:

$$\begin{array}{l} \text{AGENT=MONSTER} \\ \rightarrow \text{AGENT COMMITS EVIL.ACT} \end{array}$$

An AGENT commits an act of evil, and from there we infer that it must be because they are a MONSTER. Crucially, in this conception the agent is *not* considered a monster until *after* the evil act has been committed, even though their monstrosity is inferred as the reason for their committing the evil act. This may be better formulated in the reverse, then:

$$\begin{array}{l} \text{AGENT COMMITS EVIL.ACT} \\ \leftarrow \text{AGENT=MONSTER} \end{array}$$

Cole’s remaining three frameworks for evil cover various other ways in which we conceptualise the *monster from within*. The “pure conception of evil” is mostly the same as the monstrous conception, but differs in that “there is no sharp boundary between humans and monsters” (2006, p. 15). That is, the pure conception is identical to the monstrous one except that it stops short of discursivising the evil as *monstrous*, as fundamentally *different*. It accepts evil as a part of humanity, rather than as a criterion against which humanity is defined. In the “impure conception”, evil exists in humanity but not for its own sake, rather “the causing of suffering to others for some other human end, such as power, wealth, security, or the greater collective good” (2006, p. 16). Humans can commit evil acts, but only as a by-product in pursuit of some other, more rational, end. Finally, Cole (2006, p. 17) names the “psychological conception”, in which humans again cannot commit evil acts for their own sake, but rather because something about their psychology breaks or warps their morality,

rationality or self-control. That is, the person themselves does not see it as committing an evil act—and is therefore not *choosing* to be evil—but rather they commit evil because some psychological problem compels them to act in a certain way, or means that they no longer process reality in a ‘normal’ manner.

Those last three frameworks—the *pure conception*, the *impure conception* and the *psychological conception*—are not, then, understandings to do with monstrosity specifically. However, there is significant overlap, particularly with the psychological conception. *Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice* (Ninja Theory, 2017), one of the examples in this chapter, portrays a protagonist with what we may recognise as psychosis. Countless works of interpretation and criticism, popular and academic, discuss Senua’s psychosis (e.g., J. Austin, 2021; Beal, 2022; Briarley, 2019; Faulkner, 2017; Fordham & Ball, 2019; Lacina, 2017). This aspect was foregrounded in the development and marketing of the game. During development, Ninja Theory received funding from the Wellcome Trust, a UK-based charitable foundation that focuses on mental health research (Saraiva Ayash & Welchman, 2017) and worked with, among others, Paul Fletcher, a neuroscientist and psychosis expert (Lloyd, 2018), and Charles Fernyhough, a psychologist with expertise in voice hearing (Ninja Theory, 2016). On the game’s Steam store page this is advertised:

Created in collaboration with neuroscientists and people who experience psychosis, Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice will pull you deep into Senua’s mind.  
(‘Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice on Steam’, 2017)

Within the game, however, it is important to note that psychosis does not explicitly feature. Senua does not think of herself as having psychosis, and nor do the game’s other characters. Her psychosis is perceived by *us* as psychological, but in the gameworld it is decidedly mythological, either as a ‘sixth sense’ or a supernatural curse. The game in this way shifts between these two understandings, showing that our psychologising of evil can in many ways simply be a way of replacing the devil and possession with science and mental illness. Through examples such as this, we see that Cole’s *psychological conception of evil* can often overlap with ideas about monstrosity. Mental illness can be perceived as an ‘inner demon’, a monster from within, either metaphorically or more explicitly as demonic possession, the invasion of a human subject by a monster. Or it can be said to turn people into monsters, perhaps giving then a pretext to the *monstrous conception* (mental illness warps the mind, which turns the person into a monster, which causes them to commit evil acts). Similarly, perceiving monsters can be psychologised also as a symptom of mental illness.

The *monster from within* thus has many possible variations, from psychology to possession to an evil soul. What they have in common is this retrospective ontologisation that provides a reason for monstrous actions. Very broadly, we might construe it in this way:

AGENT=MONSTER  
→ AGENT COMMITS EVIL.ACTS

Or read the other way:

AGENT COMMITS EVIL.ACTS  
← AGENT=MONSTER

The core is simply that the AGENT is a MONSTER, and *therefore* commits evil acts. However, this construction could at least partially describe any monster type. After all, if the agent was not considered a monster, then I would not be examining them here. In this construction, then, there are two further key considerations. The first is that the reason for *why* AGENT=MONSTER is in some way agent-internal. That may be that they are psychologically ‘twisted’, demonically possessed or simply have an ‘evil heart’. The second is that the agent must be one for whom being a monster would be unusual. The *monster from within* does not so much apply to the Hydra of Lerna, for example, even though it may be ontologically considered a monster. Rather, it is when an agent is one who would not *normally* be categorised as a monster acts so heinously that they become construed as a monster as a way of explaining their actions. Therefore, we can take the immanence and inference as central. Monstrosity becomes a way of explaining certain behaviours. (Or, rather, a way of *not* explaining.)

This also individualises the problem. It is not, for instance, that *all* people have within them the capacity for evil, but that *this* person was actually a monster all along. It is a way of abjecting someone from a social group who otherwise cannot be abjected. The hydra is not at all human and so it is not particularly difficult to comprehend when it does things very differently than we do. When we learn of the actions of Ted Bundy, for example, or Peter Madsen, we are all the more disturbed because they are otherwise ordinary humans. Their actions reflect on all of us, however indirectly, unless we construe them as being fundamentally different from us. Therefore, we might sharpen our construction like so:

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AGENT COMMITS EVIL ACTS
← AGENT=MONSTER
[→ AGENT'S.SOCIETY ABJECTS AGENT]

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That the agent’s society abjects the agent is not stated explicitly, but is rather inferred from the construction of them as a monster. The *monster from within* is therefore a way of individualising monstrosity in one is otherwise part of a group. Exactly *how* the monstrosity is individualised depends on the formation of the group. In a religious group, demonic possession or a fundamentally evil spirit would be typical, or other religious or folkloric explanations such as doppelgängers. In a society that champions empiricism and rationality, psychological or biological explanations tend to be employed.

## The monster from without

The obvious alternative to the *monster from within* is the *monster from without*. Sometimes the difference between the two can be subtle. For example, the monster perceived as an ‘inner demon’ who causes psychological issues or demonic possession blurs these boundaries. Clearly, the originary monster is perceived as being from without, yet by invading a subject it turns them too into a monster. In Cole’s *monstrous conception*, the presence of pure evil (evil done for its own sake) marks a fundamental, ontological difference. A *person* cannot be purely evil because if they are then they are not really a person but a *monster*. The problem, as previously mentioned, is that this conception cannot explain “why certain human beings

have a radically different nature to other human beings” (2006, p. 14). They ‘just are’ monsters. Cole does note, however, that “in fiction and mythology the presence of the evil character is explained in terms of a two- (or more) world model—the evil monster came from another world” (2006, p. 14). This has important implications for how that evil is perceived and treated. Cole continues, saying that “in order to explain their presence in *our* world all we have to do is describe their journey; as we have no understanding of their world, there is no requirement to explain their nature” (2006, p. 14).

This is a common construction of monsters in games, particularly in fantasy where other worlds can be included in the diegesis without much difficulty. This is essentially the ‘gate to Hell’ explanation: the monster is not a ‘normal’ part of our world and so rather than reconcile the existence of monstrosity, learn to live alongside it, or alter it in some other way, all that is needed is banishment and elimination. Send them back from whence they came and our world will be right again. This two-world version of the *monster from without* therefore bids only the destruction of the monster, rather than, say, reconciliation of the category crisis they represent. As I analyse in this chapter, Senua in *Senua’s Sacrifice* learns that she cannot simply hack and slash her demons away, but Doomguy in *Doom* most certainly can run and gun his demons down. The more subtle construction of Mongol invaders in *Ghost of Tsushima* as monsters soon reflects back on the samurai defenders and especially Jin, who blurs the distinction between them. In *Ghost of Tsushima*, we learn that there is no ontological difference between samurai and Mongol, and this is an uncomfortable tension. In *Doom*, the demons come from a different plane of reality and are the pure embodiment of evil, and so killing them is presented as unambiguously good.

Cole’s two-world proposition here may present a false binary, however. Frog notes that “otherworlds are usually thought of as somehow outside of or beyond the empirical world, but the issue is not so simple”, and introduces *otherworlding* as a process to address this, building off of the notion of the other and othering (2020, p. 454). The otherworld is not always found in a separate reality or plane of existence. Frog traces the process of otherworlding in many spatial practices, from the otherworld of grandma’s house from the perspective of the child to the otherworld of ghosts which cohabit our empirical world, but which cannot normally be perceived, to otherworlds fully separate physically and metaphysically. The key in mundane spatiality as well as in the more fantastical is that the otherworld is a space in which the rules are changed. Social relations may change, such as at grandma’s house when the mother becomes also a child, the child also a grandchild (2020, p. 467). Or hegemonic power may be asserted differently, such as in a teenager’s room covered in posters, designed to assert their dominance over the space (2020, p. 466). Or fundamental rules may change, whereby a key signal that we are in outer space is that gravity works differently (2020, p. 467).

In expanding the process of othering to space—otherworlding—Frog notes that the “othering of places is tightly linked to the othering of people … the common characterization of otherworlds as social environments is based on perceived connections between people and places that they inhabit” (2020, p. 460). Crucially, this also works in reverse: “the identification of a person or group with an otherworld location reciprocally constructs otherness into his or her identity” (2020, p. 461). For my purposes here, that is salient because it means that

the construction of a *place* as evil, immoral, monstrous, etc. can mean that its denizens are by association made monstrous. Frog's work here can also be used to better understand the nuances and gradations between the 'normal' world and the otherworld in a two-world conception like Cole's: What is the more precise otherness of the otherworld in a specific case and how does that affect the mythologisation?

In its most basic form, we might present the *monster from without* as such:

```
MONSTER ENTERS OUR.WORLD
→ MONSTER IS SLAIN~BANISHED~ASSIMILATED
```

Or, in a possession model:

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MONSTER ENTERS PERSON
→ MONSTER CONTROLS~TURNS~TORMENTS PERSON
→ MONSTER IS SLAIN~BANISHED~ASSIMILATED
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Unlike the *monster from within*, which begins with an agent who *becomes* retrospectively construed as a monster, in this construction the monster begins as a monster, often by virtue of their coming from an evil or monstrous otherworld (most explicitly in a portal to Hell, for instance). Because they come from another world, we do not need to worry too much about category crises or reflections on ourselves. We simply need to get rid of them. Sometimes, the *monster from without* may be assimilated instead of slain or banished, whereby it remains in our world but loses its status as monster. For example, the popular film *How to Train Your Dragon* (Sanders & DeBlois, 2010), based on Cressida Cowell's series of books, begins with dragons as terrifying monsters who destroy villages but, through the courageous acts of the protagonist, ends with humans and dragons living in harmony.

This construction can follow the *monster from within*. Because the *monster from within* constructs a monster and abjects them, if that 'monster' then tries to re-enter society, they might be considered a *monster from without*, because they have already been construed as a monster and abjected from society, so they are no longer 'within'. Cases such as these may blur the boundaries, however, and it may depend from which perspective events unfold whether one construction is the semantic centre or another is.

## Artificial monster

While the first two monster-types deal primarily with where monsters come from or where monstrosity lies, the *artificial monster* considers monsters which are aberrant creations of humankind. Paradigmatic (but not all-inclusive) of this is the mythology that has been constructed around the Frankenstein story. As a cultural mythology, this does not rely on the intricacies of Mary Shelley's novel, *Frankenstein* (1818/1993), which has instead become a touchstone for a more distilled mythic form:

```
SCIENTIST PUSHES BOUNDARIES OF:SCIENCE
→ SCIENTIST ACCIDENTALLY.CREATES MONSTER
→ MONSTER ESCAPES SCIENTIST
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Essentially, a scientist ‘plays god’ and accidentally creates a monster that they cannot control or contain. The accidental part is important within the Frankenstein mythology. The creation of the monster must be an unexpected, unintended consequence of what they were actually trying to accomplish. In *Frankenstein*, this is exploring a previously unknown basic element of life, with which life may be imbued in inanimate objects. In the broader *artificial monster* type, the creation of the monster may instead be intentional. In these cases, however, it is often still the case that the monster’s creators ultimately lose control of it. For example, in *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Stevenson, 1886/2003), Hyde is initially Jekyll’s own creation, but he ceases to be able to control the transformations.

Shelley’s encapsulation in particular of the fear of scientists ‘playing god’ was so powerful that it is still a force in the popular understanding of science and the ethics of science today. Peter Nagy et al. (2018a, 2018b, 2020), for example, explore the ‘Frankenstein myth’ in a number of articles, remarking on “its enduring social and ethical impact on science and scientists” (2020, p. 739). This reflects a wider consideration of the myth within the sciences, often as a cautionary tale, for example in artificial intelligence (Lehman-Wilzig, 1981), biotechnology (C. S. Campbell, 2003), theology of science (Peters, 2018), medical ethics (Koepke, 2019) and agriculture (Rollin, 1986), to name only a few instances where Frankenstein is explicitly invoked. The myth is also reconstituted in various cultural arenas, not only as direct retellings or reimaginings of Shelley’s story such as *The Frankenstein Chronicles* (B. Ross & Langford, 2015–2017), which continue to find success, but also as a construction in films such as *Rocky IV* (Stallone, 1985; see Rushing & Frentz, 1989).

The Frankenstein myth would be one of many such monstrosities of artificial creation. Of course, it would be remiss not to emphasise that Shelley does not paint the Creature as a monster unambiguously. As the saying goes, ‘knowledge is knowing that Frankenstein is not the monster; wisdom is knowing that Frankenstein *is* the monster’. What *Frankenstein*’s treatment of monstrosity rather does is take us to that border between humanity and monstrosity, warning us of the capacity for humankind’s powers of creation to push at the very boundary of humanity itself. What the *artificial monster* reflects is an anxiety towards the unexpected, unanticipatable extent of people’s creative power and the potentially uncanny results of that.

From the other direction, it also reflects an anxiety towards the potential for nonhuman entities to mimic humanity. The pinnacle of this is today found in the commonplace figure of the android, synthetic humans who typically look either almost identical to or total indistinguishable from humans. When androids are a part of a fictional world, it is almost always a vital task to in some way distinguish the android from the ‘real’ human (in Dick, 1968/1996, for example). These types of *artificial monster* cause us to question what about our humanity *cannot* be imitated. As Philip K. Dick asks in a speech, “what is it, in our behaviour, that we can call specifically human? That is special to us as a living species?” (1972/1995, p. 187). (I have written more elsewhere on androids and other technological monsters, see Ford, 2020a.) In their uncanniness, the *artificial monster* can make our humanity feel commodified, modular, instrumental, replicable and disposable, breaking down our established categories and borders.

The *artificial monster* need not be human or humanoid, though that is a common avenue. *Pokémon the First Movie* (Yuyama, 1998), for example, sees Team Rocket hire a scientist, Dr. Fuji, to clone the mythical Pokémon Mew. Fuji creates the first artificial Pokémon, Mewtwo, who turns on his creators as well as human- and Pokémonkind. Notably, while Mew is small and cute, Mewtwo is tall, more humanoid and with a mean look. Consider also the many kinds of machines in *Horizon Zero Dawn*, created either by Faro Automated Solutions as biomass-fuelled combat machines, or by the AI GAIA as terraforming tools, but which turn hostile in a mysterious phenomenon known as the Derangement.

The *artificial monster*, then, reflects the anxiety of creation, the capacity for people to create things that far surpass their own power, and potentially their control too. That we can create things that we may not be able to contain and which may have devastating, unintended consequences is a threat that lurks alongside the act of creation. The anxiety of creation is a much broader phenomenon than monsters. A now paradigmatic example would be the creation of nuclear weapons. J. Robert Oppenheimer's famous quoting of the *Shrimad Bhagavad Gita* when he says, "I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds" (Giovannitti & Freed, 1965). An undoubted technoscientific marvel, the atomic bomb Oppenheimer had been instrumental in creating appears to have surpassed his power and control, in his perception, changing or defining his nature. But such runaway power is often expressed through the monstrous, especially in fiction.

Overall, we may summarise the *artificial monster* as such:

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KNOWLEDGEABLE.AGENT (K.A) PUSHES BOUNDARIES OF:KNOWLEDGE
→ K.A CREATES MONSTER
→ K.A LOSES CONTROL OF:MONSTER

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Often, as I have discussed, the AGENT is a scientist. But they may also be someone pushing at the boundaries of magical knowledge, for instance. The key is that they are entering uncharted territories of knowledge where there are no prior mistakes to learn from or masters to guide one's path. As a result of pushing these boundaries, a monster is created. As mentioned, this is usually inadvertent, but may also be intentional. The monster then proves too powerful for the agent to control. Often this happens soon after creation, such as with a dramatic scene where the monster breaks out of the laboratory. But it can also be a subtler, slower-moving loss of control. The influential anime series *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (Anno, 1995–1996), is a good example of this. The mechas (giant robots piloted by humans) called Evangelions represent the bleeding edge of military technology, powerful weapons in the fight against the mysterious Angels, beings of immense power who are trying to destroy the headquarters of Nerv, Japan's special paramilitary force. But throughout the series there are increasing signs that the Evangelions are more than mechas, are not properly understood, and have a dangerous and unpredictable power beyond the control of Nerv.

## Monster of nature

Something of an opposite number to the *artificial monster*, the *monster of nature* demonstrates anxieties surrounding the sublime power of nature and humankind's relationship to

it. As discussed previously, excess is a facet of many types of monsters, particularly if the term is used liberally. Monsters can be excessively evil, cruel and vicious; excessively grotesque with exaggerated deformities; excessively strong, and so on. *Nature in excess* refers more specifically to that which is natural (not created by people) but taken to a monstrous excess. *The Day of the Triffids* (Wyndham, 1951) is an example that comes immediately to mind, in which excessively large, carnivorous plants begin killing people and spreading uncontrollably. This takes very natural things—plants, even carnivorous ones—and turns their key features to a monstrous excess. Carnivorous plants in this world now not only eat small insects but are big enough to consume people. They not only spread like many invasive plant species that we know, but they spread so much that they take over the world.

In its broader sense, nature in excess can refer to anything perceived as natural, including human features. This is partly the subject of my work on giants (Ford, 2019a, 2020a, 2020b), humans or humanoid beings whose size and proportions are in excess of normal human limits. Often what excess does, particularly in a human(oid) context, is take traits which are normally desirable or idealised and take them to excess, demonstrating that these otherwise positive aspects also need boundaries. It is a common societal ideal for men to be strong, but when they are *too* strong that strength becomes terrifying and monstrous, for example.

*Monsters of nature* also include monstrous avatars of nature. A particular example might be Norse fire and ice giants, which find their way into many games. Monsters such as these represent the raw power of nature—the power of fire, for instance—but in a sentient, dangerous, hostile form. In my master’s thesis (Ford, 2019a), I discuss giants who are ‘aspects of nature’ in this way. Nature refuses to conform to our anthropic perspective. In particular, we often find the time and scale of nature difficult to grasp.

Rob Nixon writes on the now-famous concept of *slow violence*, “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” (2011, p. 2). Similarly, Jill S. Schneiderman discusses the idea of *deep time*, a temporality vastly beyond human comprehension (2012, p. 84). Many natural processes occur over unfathomably long periods of time that far surpass even the human lifespan, let alone the realm of seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months and years that we live by.

Likewise, nature for the most part operates at unfathomably small or large scales. As humans, we can ourselves perceive only a slither, like the tiny fraction of the electromagnetic spectrum that makes up visible light. The vastness of a mountain range, the microscopic ecology of bacteria on the body, the sweeping desert, the world’s oceans all acting ultimately as one interconnected system. These we can all only understand through abstractions, renderings that suit our embodied perspective. Göran Englund and Scott Cooper note that this discrepancy means that in ecological experiments “the interpretation of experimental results often requires extrapolation from the limited spatial and temporal scales of experimental systems to the much larger and longer scales of natural systems” (2003, p. 161). In other words, rather than using the “‘effective scale,’ which describes the scale of the system as experienced by the organisms” (2003, p. 170), we use *our* scale and extrapolate from that, assuming a uniformity and homogeneity that may not exist at the effective scale.

Nature's incomprehensible dimensions of space and time in particular are part of what makes the environment a *hyperobject* for Timothy Morton (2013). Nature simply operates on scales of time and size that are unfathomable to us. What is a billion years to someone who will live a hundred if they are very lucky? Games, Alenda Y. Chang argues, offer "distinctive opportunities for the representation of pressing ecological quandaries" due to how they can allow the player to play with scale (2019, p. 72). One of the ways that they do this, I argue, is through monsters. I have previously used the example of the Talus in *Breath of the Wild* as one such *monster of nature*. Unable to comprehend the hyperobject of the environment, "the Talus connects us to the environment and provides the environments the opportunity to act in a way that we can understand within our anthropocentric frame of reference" (Ford, 2019a, p. 61). *Monsters of nature* in this way bring nature into *our* temporal and spatial scale, allowing us to grapple with the anxieties and category crises in ways that we can more intuitively grasp.

Nature cannot really be abjected in the same way an *artificial monster* or an undesirable person can, however. The *monster of nature* in this way reflects a different set of cultural anxieties and must be dealt with differently. In particular, the *monster of nature* often reflects tensions between people and the environment; the resistance to increasing human supremacy over the natural world. The *monster of nature* can prompt us to reflect on a discordant relationship between us and our environment. *Shadow of the Colossus* (SCE Japan Studio & Team Ico, 2005) is a prime example of this. Drew Fortugno observes that the colossi ignore "the player until forced to defend themselves", creating the "troubling feeling that if the player had just left the colossi alone, nothing back would have happened" (2009, p. 174). This leads to the feeling that "the player is the monster, ruthlessly hunting down and killing innocent beasts in the barren wilderness" (2009, p. 174). Alexander Lehner, building on Fortugno's argument here, argues that "the hybrid materiality of fur, stone, and ruins also renders [the colossi] representatives of the environment" (2017, p. 67). Because nature cannot easily be abjected, the *monster of nature* can in cases such as these turn a perceived hero into a monster. In this way, HERO SLAYS MONSTER.OF.NATURE is an ambiguous motif that can prompt reflection on the discursive categories of both *hero* and *monster*.

In other cases, the excessive nature manifested as a *monster of nature* may signify a monstrous *world*, a world out of control that requires the domination or stewardship of benevolent humans. The *God of War* series (2005–2022) or FromSoftware games may demonstrate this, often depicting worlds in which monsters are abundant yet ordinary, natural inhabitants, but whose destruction is not cause for reflection on one's relationship with the natural world.

With these four types laid out, I now turn to the game analyses. The first is *Doom*.

## 6.4 Doom

*Doom* (id Software, 1993a) is perhaps the most straightforward example one could think of for a chapter on monsters. As I hope my *Call of Duty* example has shown, mythology as a framework is particularly well-suited to analysing the most seemingly obvious, straightforward examples, revealing all sorts of hidden mythologies behind the most innocuous design decisions. The premise of *Doom* is simple: in the future, an unnamed marine is sent to Mars, a portal to Hell opens and demons flood out. Later games—particularly the latest two, *Doom* and *Doom Eternal* (id Software, 2016, 2020)—expand the lore greatly, but for the earlier games and especially the first, there is little expansion beyond that basic premise. As the game's manual puts it:

Welcome to DOOM, a lightning-fast virtual reality adventure where you're the toughest space trooper ever to suck vacuum. Your mission is to shoot your way through a monster-infested holocaust. Living to tell the tale if possible. (id Software, 1993b, p. 2)

It's a game about shooting demons. And it is precisely that very barebones premise—Mars, marines, demons—that makes the series so interesting from the perspective of myth. It is because of the deeply engrained mythologies of these elements that means they do not need establishment or elaboration. They are so firmly naturalised in their various roles that the reason for why you are a marine on Mars shooting demons goes, almost literally, without saying. It is well-known that in the original design documents, there was a much longer, more complex narrative, but that “the final version of *DOOM* simplified this structure considerably” (Pinchbeck, 2013, p. 21).

In his book, *Doom: Scarydarkfast* (2013), Daniel Pinchbeck argues that the basic story of *Doom* “gives you a solid, robust framework for settling into a well-defined set of expectations” (2013, p. 67):

Everything that moves wants to kill us and is a brainless, hate-filled, blood-thirsty aberration and an insult to God and man: shoot anything that moves (unless you can chainsaw it instead). Enjoy the slaughter. Remember, you are an honorable man (you socked that civvy-killing coward of an officer), and this is not just about saving the world; it's about revenge. A weird hellish dimension is leaking into this universe, which means anything goes. (2013, p. 67)

It is precisely the mythology of *Doom*'s basic elements that allows for this straightforward experience. What the concept of *demon* means to us makes slaughtering them morally uncomplicated. The distant location of Mars means that collateral damage or outside interference can be forgotten about. The ‘all hope is lost’ premise—“seems all your buddies are dead” (id Software, 1993b)—means that moving forward and killing are the only actions that make sense.

## Demons: Manifest evil

In Pinchbeck's book, an interview with *Doom* designer John Romero explains why it's demons that come through the portal on Mars:

Instead of aliens from somewhere in the universe coming through, it's demons from hell, which is a total juxtaposition from what you expect to see in space. You'd never expect that in space, and that was our cool hook, that something you'd just never expect. (Pinchbeck, 2013, p. 21)

Romero is right to say that we would not necessarily expect demons in space. Demons would more typically be associated with fantasy settings, while space and Mars with science fiction. While 'demons' is the collective term Romero uses here to describe all of the player's foes in *Doom*, this is not always the term used. The manual has a page titled "THE ENEMY" where the different types of foes are listed, describing them as "a host of baddies", some of whom "are just regular guys with a bad attitude, others are straight from Hell" (id Software, 1993b, p. 13). This page lists "Former Humans", "Former Human Sergeants", "Imps", "Demons", "Spectres", "Lost Souls", "Cacodemons" and "Barons of Hell", warning that "some of the monsters you'll face aren't shown here" (id Software, 1993b, p. 13), referring to later beasts like the Cyberdemon and Spider Mastermind. Their common origin in Hell, however, means that demon becomes fitting and common nomenclature.

'Demon' is a broad term that encompasses many disparate beings in religion, occultism and folklore. Etymologically, demons (from ancient Greek δαίμων, *daemon*) were not necessarily evil, referring instead to divine power of some kind. But today, particularly in Western cultures, demons are almost invariably (indeed, synonymously) evil. They are typically a pure embodiment of evil. Although many cultures feature demons (or equivalents), the rigidity of this association in the West is most likely a result of Christian influence. A more detailed history tells a far more complex story, but how it has crystallised in popular culture, at least from the perspective of my enmeshment in society, is simple: Heaven = good, Hell = evil; demons live in Hell and are therefore evil (or are evil, and therefore live in Hell). We can see this in sayings like 'you're going to Hell for that' and 'that'll get you into Heaven' as metaphors for having done bad or good acts. Demons in this sense fit into Northrop Frye's understanding of myth as the fully metaphorical, static dimension of meaning, of which the demonic represents the undesirable contrast to the heavenly (1957/2020, p. 139).

This dualistic view was not always dominant. As Jung observes:

In Western antiquity and especially in Eastern cultures the opposites often remain united in the same figure, though this paradox does not disturb the primitive mind in the least. ... The clearest expression of this is the Christian reformation of the Jewish concept of the Deity: the morally ambiguous Yahweh became an exclusively good God, while everything evil was united in the devil. (1959/1980a, p. 189)

Jung's claim that this is due to minds becoming less "primitive" seems now absurd and offensive. But if the function of myth is partly to distil and decontextualise, then the gradual

disambiguation of ambiguous or polysemic figures into separate, monosemic figures who more straightforwardly embody specific traits or values makes sense. In the popular conception of Heaven and Hell, we find uncomplicated spatial and metaphysical representations of good and evil. Good has a place. So does its opposite, evil. These places have denizens. And so, we have good angels contrasted with evil demons. This mythology then becomes reciprocal. Angels are good because they live in Heaven; Heaven is good because it has angels (and God) in it.

This dualism of place then fits well with Cole's two-world argument. Hell can be construed of as a separate world. Evil comes from Hell. We do not need to understand the evil, therefore, only cast it back to Hell. Cole illustrates this with the example of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Whedon, 1997–2003):

Buffy and her comrades protect the Californian town of Sunnydale—and the rest of the world—from vampires and other evil monsters. Sunnydale is a site for evil activity because it is built on a ‘hellmouth’, a gateway between our world and a demon dimension. ... Often her struggle is an apocalyptic one, to prevent her evil enemies from opening the gateway, collapsing the boundary between the human and demon worlds, and so destroying humanity. (2006, pp. 14–15)

This description sounds not entirely unlike the plot of *Doom*. As in *Buffy*, a portal to a demonic dimension is opened and out pour demons. In *Doom*, this threat to humanity does not seem quite to immediate, however, as we are not on Earth but on Mars. But this too manifests eventually: The first game ends with the opening of a portal to Earth, leading to the events of *Doom II: Hell on Earth* (id Software, 1994). Hell being a separate world in *Doom* means that understanding the demons is not necessary, just pushing them back through the door and closing it. Hell and the evil it represents is compartmentalised as ontologically separate from humanity. Demons embody pure evil and that evil has nothing to do with us. It can therefore be killed and removed without question or introspection. That is perfect for what *Doom* sets out to accomplish, Pinchbeck argues: “It’s a contract, and it’s a very well-honed one ... run and shoot and run and shoot, until there are no more corridors and no more demons” (2013, p. 67).

The game’s premise is then a very straightforward two-world conception of evil:

```
PORAL TO:HELL OPENS
→ DEMONS INVADE HUMAN.WORLD
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What is important here is the ontologisation of the demons as already evil. There is no dis-cursivising within the gameworld, making monsters out of people or creatures. A portal to the world of evil opens, and the embodiments of evil invade the human realm with no motivation other than to commit evil acts.

## **Marines: Uncomplicated badassery**

What of Doomguy? The staggeringly lazy name of *Doom*’s playable figure offers little in the way of characterisation. ‘Doomguy’ initially was only a name for convenience. The name is

never used in *Doom* nor in its manual. In later titles, Doomguy's identity becomes more fleshed out, taking on the more refined monikers of Doom Slayer, DOOM Marine and The Slayer. But what do we know of Doomguy in the first title? Relatively little, and intentionally so. The game's manual begins with Doomguy's backstory:

You're a space marine, one of Earth's toughest, hardened in combat and trained for action. Three years ago you assaulted a superior officer for ordering his soldiers to fire upon civilians. He and his body cast were shipped to Pearl Harbor, while you were transferred to Mars, home of the Union Aerospace Corporation. The UAC is a multi-planetary conglomerate with radioactive waste facilities on Mars and its two moons, Phobos and Deimos. With no action for fifty million miles, your day consisted of suckin' dust and watchin' restricted flicks in the rec room. (id Software, 1993b, p. 1)

The use of the second person pronoun underscores that emphasis on player rather than character. Doomguy is not really meant to be his own person, rather a very minimal role that you inhabit as a player.

Victor Navarro (2012) in introducing the term *avatarness* notes the minimum construction of what he calls the "controllable subject" in first-person shooters: "players are basically embodied by a controllable camera and a crosshair. The next key element in the construction of the FPS avatarness would be the weapon and/or the hands holding it" (2012, p. 83). This is summarised by the title of his chapter: 'I Am a Gun'. In the most minimal controllable subject in a first-person shooter, the player essentially controls a floating camera that can move around the world and has a gun that shoots at the centre of the view. Navarro's avatarness describes eight main "characteristics that constitute the dual embodiment offered to the player" (2012, p. 70), through which we can see that Doomguy does have some elements of characterisation, such as the picture of Doomguy's face in the user interface (2012, p. 79).

Although the characterisation is very sparse, there is a minimal role provided, and what comprises it is interesting. We have an elite soldier (who, if not literally from the US within the gameworld, then from somewhere heavily US-inspired) who has a mind and a morality of his own over and above obeying his superiors, sent far from home. In the previous chapter on heroes, I dedicate a section to the mythology of special forces soldiers and its use in the *Call of Duty* series. That same mythology is employed here and so its details need not be repeated. That being a *marine* is part of *Doom*'s minimal player role evokes in that single word an array of associations including discipline, skill, physical prowess, focus, control over one's mind and so on. As the manual puts it, "one of Earth's toughest, hardened in combat and trained for action" (id Software, 1993b, p. 1). Just as demons are the superlative, pure embodiments of evil, so are marines the purest embodiments of 'badassery' in popular culture—admirably independent-minded, tough, skilled, in control, and cool. With the mythology of the marine deployed in such a superlative way, we are freed from a number of otherwise difficult questions. We are freed from questioning how one man could stay composed and kill so many demons, how they could competently wield this variety of weaponry, how they have the strength to withstand such punishment, and why it is them on the frontlines. The answer to all of these is in the manual's introduction: you are a badass marine.

That Doomguy is a hypermasculine, white male also plays into this. Many have pointed out that whiteness and maleness (among other traits) are taken as *default* in games as well as many other cultural forms. A viral tweet by games scholar Emma Vossen summarises this excellently and succinctly:

Gamers are still convinced that there are only:

- Two races: white and “political”
- Two genders: Male and “political”
- Two hair styles for women: long and “political”
- Two sexualities: straight and “political”
- Two body types: normative and “political” (Vossen, 2019)

The point is not that nonwhite, nonmale (etc.) characters cannot exist, but that their existence always becomes a point unto itself (“political”), while the existence of able-bodied, straight, white men does not. So in pursuit of as unobtrusive a character as possible in Doomguy, it is unsurprising that he adheres to most of these ‘defaults’: white, male, able-bodied.

Many scholars in game studies have discussed these ‘defaults’ in the context of player-characters and broader gaming cultures. For example, David R. Dietrich examines character-creation options, and observes that while there was no “explicit racist intent” (2013, p. 98), “the patterns of restrictions on character creation seem to constitute omissions based upon the unquestioned standards of normative whiteness” (2013, p. 99). Thomas H. Apperley and Kishonna L. Gray identify “the dominant default able-bodied, anglophone, cis-het, white technomasculine culture of gaming” (2021, p. 41), focusing particularly on the coding of “hypermasculinity” in games (2021, p. 49). Condis argues through a reading of *Ready Player One* (Cline, 2011) that “the gaming subculture” is imagined as “almost exclusively white and male because it reflects and reproduces the historical and material conditions that led to the creation of its featured texts” (2016, p. 9). About 16 years after the release of *Doom*, Dmitri Williams et al. (2009) compare a “virtual census” of videogames to the 2000 US census. Sampling “the top 150 games across all platforms, with a minimum of 15 titles per system” (2009, p. 823), they find that white males are vastly overrepresented amongst all characters in games, but particularly “among the primary ‘doer’ characters” (2009, p. 824).

These analyses corroborate Audrey Lorde’s notion of the *mythical norm*, the ideal but unattainable constellation of traits in a given society (1984/2007, p. 116). In the US context, she describes this as “white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian [sic], and financially secure” (1984/2007, p. 116). In their mythic mode, these categories become unattainable. Even if one nominally fits each category, one can always be seen to fall short of the pure ideal in some way. I am male, but am I masculine *enough*? I am relatively thin—but look, I have already qualified my answer. I am young, but could be younger. The myth of the marine overlaps with this mythic norm to a large degree, often serving as an ideal that is at least adjacent to the mythic norm. As an exaggerated caricature of the marine, Doomguy comes close to embodying a societal ideal. In the positive (as in propositional, not value) sense, he embodies idealised traits; in the negative sense, his characterisation is vague enough that he does not display flaws or embody *unidealised* traits.

In an interview with Zdenko Mago for the game studies journal *Acta Ludologica*, Romero discusses the design of Doomguy as a playable figure:

**Z. M.: In the early stages of Doom development, did you ever consider that the Doom Marine (also Doomguy or Doom Slayer) could be female?**

**John Romero:** At the time we didn't consider it—we thought of the player as a Rambo-like character, but named the character Doomguy since multi-player mode meant anyone could be that character. We never thought of including a female avatar because our idea of a space marine was male, and games rarely had female avatars back then. (2020, p. 69)

Romero's admission here speaks to Dietrich's point. Doomguy is a white male not because of any intended, active racism or misogyny, but because of that defaultness. When one does not "consider it", a white male emerges. Other kinds of character only emerge through *active intention*. This default quality to being white and male is not a function of the mythology of whiteness and maleness per se, but the mythologisation of the concept of 'normal', such that whiteness and maleness becomes naturalised, depoliticised and decontextualised. The reference to Rambo as well helps to demonstrate that Romero and the team appear to be quite straightforwardly and uncritically plucking from established mythologies—where the work of creating associations and a set of meanings has already been done—rather than attempting to produce anything substantially different in that sense. This culminates in what Chad Sean Habel (2018) observes in *Doom* as the hypermasculine 'badass' power fantasy, constructed using various mythologies to eschew nuance, flaws and problematisations.

From here, we can begin to lay out Doomguy's heroic construction, building on our previous description of the demons:

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A1. MARINE ASSAULTS SUPERIOR TO:PROTECT.INNOCENTS
→ A2. MARINE SENT TO:MARS [AS:PUNISHMENT]
B1. PORTAL TO:HELL OPENS ON:MARS
B2. DEMONS INVADE MARS
B3. DEMONS SLAY MARINE'S.COMRADES
→ C. LONE.MARINE SLAYS DEMONS

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Notably, A1–B3 all occur prior to the first moment of gameplay. → C. LONE.MARINE SLAYS DEMONS comprises essentially the entirety of the game as it is played. A1–B3 are therefore pretext for gameplay such that LONE.MARINE SLAYS DEMONS can be as diegetically unproblematic as possible, allowing for a pure power fantasy. Doomguy is portrayed as a moral victim from the beginning: he disobeys a superior officer for a noble reason, is punished for his act of good, and then everyone else around him is killed. In that setup, we have Doomguy depicted as both a badass and a moral hero *and* give him nothing left to lose. He has already been sent many millions of kilometres away from his home as an unjust punishment, and now there is no one left for him to worry about saving, caring about, compromising or working with. It's just Doomguy, a lot of bad guys, some very good reasons to kill them, and nothing else to worry about.

## Mars: The sterile, red planet

Given the previous section on Doomguy as a hypermasculine marine, it is not surprising that Mars—whose symbol ( $\delta$ ) is also used to represent the male gender—should be the game’s setting. Astronomer Carl Sagan writes in *Cosmos* that “Mars has become a kind of mythic arena onto which we have projected our earthly hopes and fears” (1980, p. 106) and this is clear in the abundance of science fiction that focuses on the red planet. This is perhaps unsurprising given that Mars is Earth’s closest neighbour; if humans become a spacefaring species, it seems likely the Mars will be where that begins.

Being Earth’s closest neighbour allowed us to observe Mars earlier than we perhaps should have. Joseph D. Miller traces the history of literature on Mars, arguing that “Mars has been a Rorschach test for the imaginative since at least the time of the Italian astronomer, Giovanni Schiaparelli. Schiaparelli, in 1877, observed what he believed to be straight lines (*canali*, or channels) in equatorial regions of Mars” (2011, p. 17). Schiaparelli appears to have been deceived by his own eyes, but his claims—along with those of other astronomers who said that they could observe seasons on Mars (Miller, 2011, p. 17)—sparked what became known as ‘Mars fever’ in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, or “the Romantic Age of Martian literature” by Miller (2011, p. 17). This was comprised of a slew of science fiction based on the prospect of life on Mars. Most famously, H. G. Wells’ *The War of the Worlds* (1897/1992) depicts a Martian civilisation who invade Earth for resources as Mars’ bounty dwindles, ultimately succumbing to pathogens on Earth that they had not developed immunity for. Miller observes how this Martian Romantic continued despite increasing evidence against the idea of an inhabited (or even inhabitable) Mars, but ultimately collapsed with the 1964 *Mariner* mission, which confirmed an empty, barren, bleak planet (2011, p. 18).

However, this was not the end of interest in Mars. Miller dubs the following era of Martian art “the Sterile Period”, lasting from 1969 to 1996 and during which fiction focused on “the challenges of colonization” of a “grim, forbidding” world (2011, p. 18). Finally, our current period “could well be called the Realistic Period”, in which there is again speculation of life on Mars, but the question is of microbial life and the possibility of water at some point in Mars’ history, rather than of an advanced, coexisting civilisation (2011, p. 19).<sup>41</sup>

*Doom* is released at the tail end of Miller’s Sterile Period. While later games in the series do reimagine the function and role of Mars, the original *Doom* treats it as appropriately sterile. In *Doom*, Mars and its two moons Phobos and Deimos are used as nuclear waste dumps primarily, with some additional research bases. The military loans the Martian moonbases to researchers of teleportation technology. It is the research into teleportation that ends with the scientists inadvertently opening a portal to Hell (thus drawing partially on some of the

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<sup>41</sup> Extrapolating to now from Miller’s context in 2011, works on Mars seem to focus primarily on its prospects as a backup Earth in the wake of climate breakdown. Although Martian terraforming narratives go back to at least the 1980s, it is difficult to find works on Mars today that don’t have to do with terraforming it. To list only three prominent examples, Andy Weir’s novel *The Martian* (2014), the boardgame *Terraforming Mars* (Fryxelius, 2016) and the survival-citybuilder digital game *Surviving Mars* (Haemimont Games, 2018).

themes surrounding the artificial monster, the scientist pushing at the bounds of knowledge and inadvertently creating a monster, although here they are released and not created).

This mythologisation of Mars in the Sterile Period then has two important constituents. First is its defining barren, bleak, hostile landscape. Mars is a desert without oasis or end. Cold like the Moon, but even further away and more isolated from civilisation. Second is the corpse of its previous mythologisation as a potential rival—or superior—to Earth civilisationally. Not only is Mars bleak and barren, but it is also *boring* in comparison to its previous Romanticism. All excitement is ripped from Martian mythology as it is revealed to be just another rock in the sky. In utopic cases, this leads to Mars becoming the blank canvas for terraforming. In less optimistic visions like *Doom*, a nuclear waste dump. A conveniently large lump of faraway land where there is no one to complain.

This latter vision is particularly amenable to the goals of *Doom*. It is science fiction but with all political context and potential dilemmas removed. That the demons spill out onto a barren planet used almost exclusively as a dumping ground again simply supports its use as a battlefield-cum-playground. No further consideration or context is demanded by its setting. The use of Mars and its specific flavour in *Doom* works both to summon the science fiction aesthetic and tradition but on a superficial level. It generates a ‘cool sciencey’ vibe but demands nothing more.

This does not change the mythic construction compiled previously, but rather helps us characterise the MARS integer as it is used here and what it draws from. Mars in this game-world is not a utopian, high-tech society, nor a neo-Western frontier. It is not a threatening rival civilisation nor an exotic land of alien species. MARS here is instead characterised by partials like EMPTY, BARREN, INHOSPITABLE and TOXIC. With that said, it also has the association with remote research. In this way, we can perhaps trace two other relations beyond the Sterile Period Mars.

One is the use of penal colonies, for example with the British Empire sending convicts to Australia from the late 18<sup>th</sup> to the mid–late 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Both Mars in *Doom* and imperial penal colonies share in being the destination for ‘criminals’ sent to lands perceived as being far away, barren and to some degree inhospitable. Mars is, of course, a more extreme example, being much further away, much more barren, and much less hospitable than Australia.

The second would be remote sites for scientific research, which today would be places like Antarctica, locations in the Arctic Circle, desert research stations and so on. Like the scientists in *Doom*, researchers travel to remote and inhospitable places to conduct cutting edge research. (Hopefully climate scientists in Antarctica do not accidentally open a portal to Hell!)<sup>42</sup> Again, Mars here is a more extreme example in that it is both much further away, much more inhospitable, and the scientists actually *do* open a portal to Hell.

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<sup>42</sup> Although this horse may already have bolted elsewhere. If certain TikTok users are to be believed, scientists have already been using CERN’s Large Hadron Collider to usher in demons from Hell for some time now (see ‘Fact check: scientists at CERN are not opening a “portal to hell”, Kochi, 2022).

## Discussion

*Doom* is the ur-shooter. This might seem odd because *Doom* was not the first shooter—that would (probably) be *Maze War* (Colley et al., 1973). *Doom* was not even the first shooter that id Software developed: *Wolfenstein 3D* (1992) released the previous year. And yet for a number of years after *Doom*'s release, what are now known as first-person shooters were dubbed ‘*Doom clones*’ (Therrien, 2015). This is no doubt due to the game’s popularity, influence and impact on the broader public consciousness (mostly in the form of moral panic), but I argue that this is in part also due to its particular mythological construction that I have outlined. It is a construction which carefully demands very little of its players to buy into and engage with. *Doom* leans into the depoliticising, decontextualising effect of myth to offer a pure distillation of a shooter experience. The player does not need to consider anything except moving forward and shooting. This is accomplished through a confluence of mythologies.

The game deploys the mythology of Mars as a sterile, barren, inhospitable, empty rock in space. This setting performs three important functions. First, it distances the action from Earth, where almost all human society is in the *Doom* gameworld. Second, in being barren and sterile, it removes any need to consider the environment. Our actions cannot have any negative consequences ecologically or environmentally because Mars is already a dead rock. Third, it provides a blank canvas for demons to pour out onto, a battle-playground.

With Doomguy, we then have the mythic ideal of an elite, independently minded marine dropped into the setting. He has very little personal traits or context beyond this ideal—he does not even have a real name. Doomguy allows the player simply to slip into a minimal heroic role: he is masculine, tough as nails, fearless, white, and is a man with his own mind and moral compass. Crucially, he is nothing *more* than that. He is depoliticised and decontextualised into as minimal and as default a role as possible, such that the player does not need to think about Doomguy as a *character*.<sup>43</sup>

Finally, *Doom*'s demons are central here, and are of course my focus in this chapter. Following a primarily Christian tradition, demons are the mythical embodiment of evil *par excellence*. They act as an unambiguous manifestation of evil pouring into the world through a portal. That they enter through a portal is also crucial here. The demons need only be defeated and the portal closed. There is no introspection, self-reflection, accommodation or assimilation needed. There is no context or plot necessary to describe why a demon is evil, no redeeming feature or political aim that can attract sympathy or empathy, and no ideology to be reckoned with. In this distilled form, *Doom* sets up an ostensibly apolitical conflict between pure good and pure evil. This is a kind of myth of mythlessness, the idea of a war without myth, without politics.

We end with the following mythic construction:

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<sup>43</sup> Of course, this will not be successful on every player—particularly, I would assume, on players for whom this ‘default’ is not particularly relatable or aspirational, such as women and people of colour. Nonetheless, I think it is fair to say that this is the *intention*, based on Romero’s comments and on who the target market would have been at that point.

- A1. MARINE ASSAULTS SUPERIOR TO:PROTECT.INNOCENTS
- A2. MARINE SENT TO:MARS [AS:PUNISHMENT]
- B1. PORTAL TO:HELL OPENS ON:MARS
- B2. DEMONS INVADE MARS
- B3. DEMONS SLAY MARINE'S.COMRADES
- C. LONE.MARINE SLAYS DEMONS

This also describes the heroic construction of Doomguy to an extent, which should not be the focus of this chapter. But that tells us mainly that heroes and monsters are often hard to prise apart. My separation of chapters represents not a large gulf between the two types of mythic construction, but separate focuses. Each needs the other to be defined. In *Doom*, the purely evil demons are defined partly in opposition to the lone marine, and vice versa. *Doom* uses decentralised mythic images almost without centralising them. Decentralised mythic images represent the “categorical identity in relation to which specific instantiations are perceived and interpreted” (Frog, 2021a, p. 172)—the noun compared with the proper noun. For example, the centralised image HRUNGNIR is a specific instantiation of the Old Norse decentralised image GIANT. In the context of *Doom*, MARS could be seen as an instantiation of something like REMOTE.WASTELAND. But Mars may be the most specific part of the mythic construction. *Doom*'s demons, in their unspecificity, are hardly less abstract than the decentralised image of DEVIL, common in folklore (Frog, 2021a, p. 172). They are not even very much more concrete than the broadest decentralised images of this kind, such as AGENT.OF.CHAOS or MONSTER. Likewise, the minimal heroic role of Doomguy, while certainly more specific than HERO, is still very broad. Indeed, Doomguy comes to constitute a decentralised image of his own, DOOM.SLAYER, instantiated differently in different games of the series—particularly after the reboot with *Doom* (2016), which names him the Doom Slayer.<sup>44</sup> *Doom* uses these highly unspecific instantiations of mythic images to focus the player on the fast and frantic gameplay, undistracted by complex or ambiguous dilemmas. As Jens Kjeldgaard-Christiansen puts it of the 2016 reboot (but equally as applicable to the original):

The game removes all ethical and prudential barriers to the player's exercise of agency. In *Doom*, there is no one to care for but yourself, and aggression can never result in anything worse than starting over from a previous checkpoint. The resulting gameplay experience is one of primal and virtually limitless physical empowerment. (2020, p. 236)

Given the mythic construction of *Doom* I have outlined, it is perhaps surprising that the game became so much a part of the political landscape that it was the subject of a moral panic. While *Doom* was not named in either of the well-known US congressional hearings on videogame violence in 1993 and 1994 (contrary to popular belief), it was a part of the wider debate (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, 2022). This was particularly enflamed in 1999, when one of the Columbine High School shooters noted his obsession with *Doom*. The controversy

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<sup>44</sup> Frog notes that certain images can, in this way, be both centralised and decentralised in different contexts. He uses the example of YGGDRASILS.ASKR (2021a, p. 172).

surrounding *Doom* primarily concerned its depiction of violence, which was at the time considered alarmingly realistic and graphic, but also the depiction of Satanic imagery.

But this could in fact be aided by its mythic (or fallaciously amythical) construction. By removing all nuance, meaning, subtext and connotation from its representations of good and evil and the battle between them, each element can be handled instrumentally. Demons are used as an uncomplicated adversary, a “cool hook” (Romero in Pinchbeck, 2013, p. 21), rather than as a thoughtful treatment of Abrahamic demonology. Likewise, Doomguy is used as an uncomplicated hero. And guns are used, presumably, because Romero thought they would be fun. This extreme surface level treatment of these mythic symbols serves to instrumentalise and commodify them, and thus their inclusion in the game is cavalier, hyperbolic and without caveat. This brazen design leaves it open to criticism by those for whom these symbols hold more meaning. An atheist metalhead looks at a demon and thinks, ‘hey, that’s pretty badass’; a devout evangelical Christian looks at a demon and sees a flippant use of a powerful expression of genuine evil, because that mythic symbol links to their entire system of faith and morality. Whether the latter’s concerns should be taken seriously is a separate question, but one which can be understood in terms of mythic relations.

## 6.5 Pokémon

Are Pokémon monsters? The name ‘Pokémon’ is a portmanteau of ‘Pocket Monsters’, a name used only for the first Japanese release of the series, *Pocket Monsters: Red and Green* (Game Freak, 1996a, 1996b). These were later released outside of Japan as *Pokémon Red Version* and *Blue Version* (Game Freak, 1998a, 1998b). Thinking of Pokémon as monsters intuitively puts them greatly at odds with the other monsters covered in this chapter. In monster theory, monsters are typically creatures that engender discomfort, expose cultural boundaries, embody that which we fear and that in some way trouble the categories we have created for society. In a word, we are usually scared of monsters. Or we are supposed to be.

But in the world of Pokémon, families encourage their ten-year-old children to roam the world alone to face these so-called monsters, capture them, befriend them, train them and command them. A cultural ecology and thriving economy are built on pitting Pokémon against each other for fame, glory and money. In Švelch’s terms, Pokémon would be a paradigmatic example of contained monstrosity. Contained literally and figuratively to the extent that they are fully commodified. Pokémon trainers carry with them a Pokédex, a digital bestiary that numbers Pokémon and describes fully their stats, abilities, what they can and cannot learn, what other Pokémon they can ‘evolve’ into, their behaviours, and so on. For these reasons, Pokémon may be worth exploring here as an insightful counterexample or challenge. The terms and aesthetics of monstrosity are used seemingly without any of the bite. Why is that? Which mythologies of monstrosity does Pokémon draw from, and in what way? Does looking at *Pokémon* through this lens show us anything unexpected?

### Kawaisa: Cute, obedient, powerful

Anne Allison talks about ‘Cuteness as Japan’s Millennial Product’ (2004), with Pokémon as the primary case study. She investigates the Japanese notion of *kawaisa* (‘cuteness’), which “involves emotional attachments to imaginary creations/creatures with resonances to childhood and also Japanese traditional culture” (2004, pp. 34–35) and is now, as they say, big business. Following interviews, Allison concluded that “*kawaii* (cute) is associated with the qualities of *amae*—sweet, dependent—and *yasashii*—gentle” (2004, p. 38). Behind this cute and gentle exterior, however, is a fierceness. Pikachu in the anime, for example, “rides atop Ash’s shoulders like a dependent child, but is a formidable warrior under this gentle façade” (A. Allison, 2004, p. 38). There is a good reason why Pokémon battles are exciting to watch for people in the universe: Pikachu can summon and control thunderbolts, move at lightning speed and strike opponents with a hardened iron tail. Most Pokémon are similarly formidable—a humorous exception is Magikarp, who can only flail uselessly. Pokémon have extraordinary powers, reaching even to the cosmogenic. The Legendary-class Pokémon Lugia, for example, can calm or conjure storms and hurricanes, and the Mythical-class Pokémon Arceus “is said to have created the regions of Sinnoh and Ransei, and may have created the entire Pokémon universe” (‘Mythical Pokémon’, 2021). This range—from fighting prowess to universe creation—is all encompassed within this *kawaisa* notion, whereby cute Pokémon can be caught and be subservient to their trainers, despite being themselves potentially

orders of magnitude more powerful than any human. The qualifier “is said to” in that description of Arceus is also telling. We do not even know the full extent of some of these creatures’ power. Pokémons draw from this idea and reinforce the connection between cuteness, subservience and a great underlying power.

That underlying power could open a path to the monstrous. Pokémons seem to straddle the boundary between cute, fluffy, friendly animals we want to cuddle, and awe-inspiring, fearsome, powerful creatures. Both sides of that divide are taken to the extreme with Pokémons, contrasting the ultra-cute and submissive behaviour of most Pokémons with their immense, supernatural power. With that said, they are, broadly speaking, securely contained. In the contemporary state of the gameworld, at least, Pokémons rarely exercise their power without being under the command of a trainer. But that command is not depicted as fully secure. Traded Pokémons (originating in a different savegame than the current player’s) have a stat called ‘obedience’, which determines the chance for a Pokémon to disobey the trainer’s (player’s) command. In the first two generations of Pokémon games, obedience is calculated in the following way:

A random integer  $R_1$  from 0 to  $T$  is generated, where  $T = \text{PokemonLevel} + \text{ObedienceCap} - 1$ . If  $R_1$  is greater than or equal to  $\text{ObedienceCap}$ , the Pokémon disobeys. (‘Obedience’, 2022)

The intention behind obedience is to prevent players from receiving a very high-level Pokémon from another player, removing all challenge from the game. As such, it is not usually very impactful. With that said, receiving new badges will display a message telling the player up to what level Pokémons they can now command. In *Pokémon Sword and Shield* (Game Freak, 2019a, 2019b), this concept is expanded into a ‘catch level limit’, whereby the number of badges a player has determines the maximum level Pokémon a trainer can catch. Trying to catch a Pokémon above the current limit results in the message, “you can’t throw a Poké Ball! It won’t let its guard down!”. So, while not usually particularly *impactful*, these examples at least *tell* the player that a Pokémon’s obedience is not guaranteed but must be earned (even if earning it is in practice not particularly difficult).

This obedience is not always a good thing. Pokémons are not all good-natured, and they may also be captured and commanded by bad actors. In *Pokémon Ruby* (Game Freak, 2002), for example, the nefarious Team Magma plan to use the Legendary Pokémon Groudon to dry up the oceans of Hoenn. In *Sword and Shield*, Sordward and Shielbert experiment with Dynamaxing nonconsenting Pokémons (temporarily making a Pokémon giant and vastly more powerful).

In these ways, Pokémons are creatures of contrasts, tensions and excess. Excess can be an important component of the monster, as I have explored, taking normal or desirable traits and attributes and taking them to a dangerous, threatening or uncomfortable extreme. The power potential of Pokémons (coupled with their potential for disobedience despite normal subservience, or of obedience to bad actors) could be read as that, particularly in contrast with what could be seen as an excessive cuteness. Pikachu is an electric mouse Pokémon who is at the same time arguably cuter than a mouse (with its exaggerated features like a cuddlier body, big, beady eyes, and emotive ears), but also far more powerful. Whether this

constitutes a *monstrous* excess is debatable, but the mythologisation of cuteness and (potential) ferocity and power is core to the Pokémon structure. We can take as partials CUTE, OBEDIENT, SUBMISSIVE, and SUPERNATURAL,POWER.

## The trainer–Pokémon relationship: Pets, slaves, servants, partners or friends?

Clearly, the trainer–Pokémon relationship is at the heart of the series. But what is the nature of this relationship, exactly? Frog describes diagrammatic schemata as part of mythic discourse analysis. A schema represents “a static relation that is both meaningful and potentially shapes meanings and interpretations of the images that it organizes” (2021a, p. 178). For example, in Old Norse mythology ÁSGARÐR/GIANTLANDS=CENTER/PERIPHERY or ODIN/THOR=FATHER/SON (2021a, p. 179). The relationship between Odin and Thor can be read through a lens of father–son relations and, vice versa, the meaning of father–son relations in the Old Norse context is usually defined at least partially in relation to the Odin–Thor relationship. These may also be symmetrical relations, like BROTHER/BROTHER (2021a, p. 179). So, what of Pokémons? TRAINER/POKÉMON=OWNER/PET? MASTER/SERVANT? FRIEND/FRIEND? COACH/ATHLETE? MENTOR/MENTEE? Considering what the core relation of Pokémons to trainers is (if there is a single static schema that can be applied) may be illuminating with regards to Pokémons and monstrosity.

In the Pokémon universe, trainers typically use a Pokémon to weaken another Pokémon in the wild, then ‘capture’ them by throwing a Poké Ball at them. The wild Pokémon then struggles for a time and is either captured or breaks free. If they break free, they either stand and continue to fight, or flee back into the wild. Once captured, Pokémons are stored in bigger-on-the-inside Poké Balls.<sup>45</sup> Trainers can throw the Poké Ball to release the Pokémon and command them to fight other Pokémons for money, glory or other prizes, or else complete other tasks for them such as building, cooking, transporting materials, and so on. This has led to much popular discussion on the nature of the trainer–Pokémon relationship. Among other things, it has been compared to slavery (M. Cohen, 2021) and dogfighting (Truong, 2016). There is less academic discussion on the relationship, but it does appear in a number of works to greater or lesser extents.

Davin Heckman (2002) writes one of the early academic works on Pokémons, and reads the trainer–Pokémon relationship through language. On the part of the trainer, he focuses on the speech act of selecting a Pokémon for battle:

The invocation of pokémons is formed of two parts. The trainer selects a poke-ball and hurls it at the opponent while reciting the words, “I choose you,” followed by the pokémons’s name (or vice versa). The physical act of selecting the pokémons is accompanied by a verbal command on the part of the trainer,

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<sup>45</sup> This is not strictly true. How Poké Balls work in the universe is not important to the point, but it is bizarre and so I will explain it anyway. Poké Balls convert Pokémons from matter into energy. That energy is stored inside the ball until it is opened, at which point the Pokémon is converted back from energy into matter. It is not known how Pokémons experience being energy inside a Poké Ball, but we are told that it is comfortable, discouraging them from escaping ('Poké Ball', 2022).

linking the physical power of release to a verbal authorization. The return to the pokeball is also conducted through command and action. The result is a linking of language to action, an authoritarian demonstration of power. (2002, sec. Pikachu, para. 1)

The trainer *commands*. Even if those commands are masked by language of choice and desire (“Pikachu, I *choose you!*”), they are commands nonetheless. In contrast, Pokémons are able only to speak their own name.<sup>46</sup> Heckman notes that these names serve the primary function of differentiating between Pokémons, which are invoked based on their particular functions, “a water pokémon is good against a fire pokémon, an insect pokémon is good against a plant pokémon” (2002, sec. Pikachu, para. 5). As such, Heckman argues that the Pokémons “serve as stand-ins for physical combat—they extend the capabilities of the body ... pokémon are biotechnological prostheses” as part of “the trainer-pokeball-pokémon assemblage” (2002, sec. Pikachu, para. 5).

Heckman’s assemblage here brings me to Backe’s (2022) typology of composite avatars. Two of Backe’s types are appropriate here, namely *static composite (symbolic equipment)* and *variable composite (some equipment)*, which he defines as such:

Static composites with symbolic equipment are epitomized by King Arthur, who is no king or even person of note until he draws the sword from the stone. (2022, p. 245)

Variable composites are only able to perform extraordinary actions through the use of one or several tools, yet without either creating them or forming a stable and iconic connection with them. (2022, p. 245)

Here, we would consider Pokémons as ‘tools’ or ‘equipment’ (following Heckman’s invocation of prothesis). Whether they are static or variable is debatable and may depend on the trainer. In the anime, for example, the Ash–Pikachu bond is no doubt static, each utterly inseparable from the other’s character, with any absences thereof being extremely painful. More abstractly, on the level of decentralised images, we might consider TRAINER/POKÉMON to be a static composite, even as centralised versions are variable. A trainer always needs a Pokémon (else what are they a trainer of?) and Pokémons in the wild are awaiting a trainer they respect. In favour of a variable composite is that trainers usually have a number of different Pokémons to call on as the situation demands, and Pokémons may over time be under the command of a variety of trainers. Either way, this suggests that in the context of the games, the trainer–Pokémon relationship is one of avatorial assemblage, that they are loosely one entity. The trainer is in the dominant position (with Pokémons as equipment), but still requiring the Pokémons to be complete. This would suggest a much less monstrous understanding of Pokémons. Or, at most, a fully contained monstrosity—so contained that the cataloguing and containment of them renders them tools.

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<sup>46</sup> With notable exceptions. Readers may be most familiar with Team Rocket’s sinister, talking Meowth in the anime, or with the humanoid clone Pokémon Mewtwo in *Pokémon: The First Movie* (Yuyama, 1998). Heckman closely examines the latter example in relation to contemporary geopolitics and the war machine, remarking in particular on Mewtwo’s unusual linguistic ability (2002, sec. Charmander).

Other scholars observe a different kind of relationship. Samuli Laato and Sampsia Rauti argue that “the narrative [of the games] supports a symbiotic, caring relationship with pokémon” (2021, p. 2816), drawing on the biophilia hypothesis that people naturally want to form relationships with other forms of life (Kahn, 1997). Capturing and battling Pokémons would seem to run counter to this symbiotic partnership. However, Laato and Rauti (2021, p. 2816) argue that the games (as well as other media works in the franchise) demonstrate that Pokémons find battling natural, enjoyable and beneficial when they are not abused—i.e., when battling is “conflict through a playful set of agreed rules” rather than coerced or excessively violent. In a similar vein, Claus-Peter H. Ernst and Alexander W. Ernst (2015) write about Pokémons and the notion of *perceived belonging*, arguing also for a mutually beneficial and enriching trainer–Pokémon relationship.

This is not always unchallenged, however, even within the series. As Laato and Rauti (2021, p. 2816) note, *Pokémon Black and White* (Game Freak, 2010a, 2010b) feature the anti-hero N, leader of antagonists Team Plasma (N is actually a puppet leader, as it turns out). N was an orphan, raised by Pokémons in the woods, and as a result sees them as friends rather than tools. In a rather direct challenge to the computational containment of the games, N says to the player early on in Accumula Town, “the Pokédex, eh? So... You’re going to confine many, many Pokémons in Poké Balls for that, then. I’m a Trainer, too, but I can’t help wondering... Are Pokémons really happy that way?” (Game Freak, 2010a, 2010b). He argues that battles actually harm Pokémons and aims to completely separate the worlds of humans and Pokémons so each can live in peace.

However, N’s mind is eventually changed by the player. Late in the game in N’s castle, he confesses:

I want to talk to you about something.

It’s about when I first met you in Accumula Town. I was shocked when I heard what your Pokémons was saying. I was shocked because that Pokémons said it liked you. It said it wanted to be with you.

I couldn’t understand it. I couldn’t believe there were Pokémons that liked people. Because, up until that moment, I’d never known a Pokémons like that. The longer my journey continued, the more unsure I became. All I kept meeting were Pokémons and people who communicated with one another and helped one another. That was why I needed to confirm my beliefs by battling with you. I wanted to confront you hero-to-hero. I needed that more than anything.

There’s no way a person like me, someone who understands only Pokémons—  
No, actually... I didn’t understand them, either. No way could I measure up to you, when you had met so many Pokémons and were surrounded by friends...  
(Game Freak, 2010a, 2010b)

N’s character arc in the plot of *Black and White* seems therefore almost a direct response to the discourse surrounding Pokémons battles likening them to dogfights and so on. N begins with a position that many would agree with but comes to be convinced otherwise by the

player. Dale Mitchell argues that N is “a representation of the liberal critique articulated by groups like PETA” (2018, p. 81). Mitchell (2018) considers the case of N from a legal perspective. He argues that the Poké Ball represents the legal concept of the *persona*, legal personhood (2018, p. 77). The Poké Ball is “a representation of the law’s power to separate subject from object and human from non-human using legal personhood” (2018, p. 79). He continues:

If the Poké Ball represents the capture of the wild and the way in which it is brought within law through the technic of the legal person, once within the law what *Pokémon* reveals is the adversarial—even gladiatorial—nature of law and legal rights. (2018, p. 79)

As such, the game demonstrates the *Pokémon* universe’s “anthropocentric construction of rights and legality”, a construction which “silences the creature and denies its rights due to its worth, its objectification at the hands of the human. ... This exclusion denies *Pokémon* their inherent liberties, a battle which N seeks to prosecute” (2018, p. 85), and an “uprising against the anthropocentric foundations of this imagined world” that the player is “compelled to defeat” (2018, p. 86). Mitchell’s interpretation sees *Pokémon* as neither equal or symbiotic partners nor as monsters, but rather as wild animals controlled by anthropocentric legal technics of personhood.

Andrew Tague attempts to answer the question perhaps most directly, in a paper titled ‘Are *Pokémon* Slaves or Willing Companions?’ (2013). In his reading, while there is some affinity with a master–slave dynamic, it is ultimately misleading to label it as that:

There are some [in the *Pokémon* fictional universe] who view them as tools or slaves but they are in the vast minority. *Pokémon* trainer and *Pokémon* relationships do have similarities but the core essence of the relationship operates on vastly different principles and ideas. The principles that govern the relationship of slave/master are ownership, domination and fear. This differs from the relationship of trainer/*Pokémon* in that the relationship is based off mutual trust, kinship and sportsmanship. The relationship is based off such dramatically different ideas and operates so differently that they cannot be called the same thing. (2013, p. 71)

In other words, the relationship for Tague is one of asymmetrical partnership, in which the *Pokémon* is junior—subservient and loyal but consenting. A more slave-like condition appears only when *Pokémon* are captured, used and abused by ‘the bad guys’ of the games and series. In the anime, Ash and his Pikachu demonstrate this. Pikachu famously refuses to live inside his Pokéball, and so Ash happily allows him to instead walk alongside or on his shoulder. This feature was quickly translated back into the games, beginning with *Pokémon Yellow* (Game Freak, 1998c), an enhanced version of *Blue* and *Red*, which allows the player to start with a Pikachu and for that Pikachu to walk alongside the player. Similarly, Ash’s Charmander/Charmeleon/Charizard in the anime is shown to be highly independent and disobedient, forcing Ash to earn the *Pokémon*’s respect before it becomes a loyal companion.

The game series also increasingly highlights the pet-like aspect to the relationship. *Sword* and *Shield* (2019a, 2019b) introduce the *Pokémon* Camp, for example. This feature allows

players to set up a campsite where they can cook curry for themselves and their Pokémons, and also play with them. Using the Switch's Joy-Con controllers' motion-detection, the player can play fetch with their Pokémons, or use the Joy-Con as a toy for the Pokémons to chase back and forth. A number of Pokémons (18 at the time of writing) can only evolve when they have a high level of friendship with their trainer, essentially rewarding the player with more powerful Pokémons in exchange for a friendlier, more pet-like relationship.

*Kawaisa* is part of what gives Pokémons this more ambiguous status. They are cute and subservient, and so fit well with how we think of household pets, but it is again their potential power that perhaps elevates them more to partner level. They are happy to be subservient for a trainer who has earned it, but they typically also have the power and the will to withhold that loyalty if they choose. It is not blind loyalty, but loyalty based on a Pokémon's informed assessment of a trainer's character and their inherent bargaining power.

In this way, Pokémons do not seem to neatly fit into any of the categories hypothesised: slave, pet, athlete, partner, friend, tool, animal. Instead, Pokémons seem to be able to stand in for any and all of these roles, drawing on various mythologies. Feeding and playing with Pokémons draws on mythologies of pet ownership to foster, amongst other things, the cuteness of Pokémons and the player's sense of protectiveness and guardianship over them. Fighting with them in battle draws on notions of skill, discipline and power from martial arts for the Pokémons themselves, and strategic gamesmanship for the trainers. Their working together consensually draws into various asymmetric partner dynamics, particularly human-animal partnerships that go beyond a pet relationship: sledding dogs or hunting eagles for instance. The abuse of the trainers' power can then draw on notions of animal abuse and even slavery. These varying notions are drawn on at different points throughout the *Pokémon* universe to establish its own particular partnership mythology that at its core relies on asymmetry (trainer and Pokémons each have very different abilities and therefore distinct roles), consensual subservience or obedience to a greater or lesser extent on the part of the Pokémons, but also the great reserve of power that the Pokémons has.

In fact, we might also take it the other way round. Instead of there being a single trainer-Pokémon dynamic, we observe what each individual dynamic appears to be and use that to make judgements about the trainer. Diagrammatic schemata coexist in this way and are hierarchised within the universe. For example:

IF TRAINER/POKÉMON=MASTER/SLAVE	THEN TRAINER=EVIL
IF TRAINER/POKÉMON=PARTNER/PARTNER	THEN TRAINER=GOOD

We can make more inferences regarding the trainer than just moral based on the diagrammatic schema we observe. A COACH/ATHLETE relationship tells us that the trainer and Pokémons are competitive. An OWNER/PET dynamic might be read as infantilising but caring, cute and perhaps more domestic. Schemata may also indicate plot progressions or perceived imperatives. For example, if we observe a MASTER/SLAVE dynamic, the implication is that the Pokémons needs to or will be freed, or the trainer must change their ways:

IF TRAINER/POKÉMON=MASTER/SLAVE THEN TRAINER=EIL  
 EITHER [→ POKÉMON IS FREED]  
 OR [→ TRAINER CHANGES]

A COACH/ATHLETE relationship also often implies that the pair will be defeated in battle and ‘taken down a peg’, because the series champions partnership relationships more strongly and discourages being *excessively* competitive.

None of these relationships position the Pokémons as monstrous, however. That is because the trainer–Pokémon relationship always includes the Pokémon as contained. There are some notable instances in which it appears that TRAINER/POKÉMON=HERO/MONSTER. In *Sword* and *Shield*, for example, it is discovered that the extraterrestrial Legendary Pokémon Eternatus is responsible for a mythical event in the game known as the Darkest Day. When Eternatus awakens, it absorbs massive amounts of energy from the region. Leakage of this energy causes the Pokémon of the region to ‘Dynamax’ (grow gigantic and immensely powerful) uncontrollably, potentially flying into a rage. The sublime antagonistic threat that Eternatus poses coupled with the quite literal excess in energy leakage codes the Pokémon as monstrous. Once discovered as the source of the Darkest Day in the games, the players set about to defeat Eternatus in a HERO SLAYS MONSTER motif. However, instead of slaying the monster, defeating Eternatus allows the player to capture it in a Poké Ball, rendering it contained and usable like any other Pokémon. In *Pokémon*, therefore, TRAINER CAPTURES POKÉMON can sometimes be an instantiation of HERO SLAYS MONSTER. The crucial difference is that instead of being slain, the monster is assimilated into the player’s composite avatar, strongly reinforcing the series’ encyclopedic containment.

## **Yōkai, Japanese folklore and the folkloresque**

It is notable that in the original Japanese, Pokémons are called by the loanword *monsutā* and not by a native term for traditional ‘monsters’ of Japanese folklore such as *kaibutsu*, *oni* or *yōkai*. After all, Pokémons are influenced greatly by Japanese folklore and in particular the *yōkai* tradition, even if not explicitly. This is marked in a number of ways.

For example, it can appear as direct transfers. Erika Ann Sumilang-Engracia (2018) points out that Ho-Oh, the Legendary counterpart to Lugia in *Pokémon Gold* and *Silver* (Game Freak, 1999a, 1999b), “is a direct reference to the Japanese folklore of a phoenix-like bird called with the same name Hō ō” (2018, p. 6). Sumilang-Engracia’s study was conducted at the time of the sixth generation of *Pokémon*, when there were 720 Pokémons in all. Out of 720, 164 Pokémons were “folklore inspired”, Sumilang-Engracia found, with direct *yōkai* transfers comprising 84 of those. That is a majority of the folkloric transfers (other folklores include Pokémons derived from Taoism, Shinto and Buddhism), comprising a little over a tenth of all Pokémons (2018, p. 13).

It is also marked in the mode of their production and proliferation. Michael Dylan Foster remarks that *yōkai* are characterised in part by “variation and abundance” (2015, p. 90) in a way that is clearly echoed in *Pokémon* (2015, p. 91). “It is exciting, and frightening, to know that there are always more *yōkai* out there”, Foster says (2015, p. 90), in a way that is also clearly reflected in *Pokémon* (Foster, 2015, p. 91); the first generation of *Pokémon* featured an

already dazzling 151 pocket monsters, while as of the eighth generation<sup>47</sup> the Pokédex now numbers 898.

Another connection between *Pokémon* and *yōkai* is in the encyclopedic containment of this abundance of creatures. Foster observes that one way in which people have sought to handle the variety and quantity of *yōkai* and which “has been predominant since at least the early Edo period is what I call the encyclopedic mode” (2015, p. 91). He continues: “this encyclopedic mode for thinking about *yōkai* (and other things) emphasizes: (1) the presentation of inclusive knowledge about a subject, (2) the compression of this knowledge into self-contained units, and (3) the organization of these units” (2015, p. 91). Foster’s observation reflects Švelch’s argument regarding the encyclopedic containment of the monster. This may be why *Pokémon*, unusually, is a franchise which began as a digital game: it draws on a folkloric tradition that is already well-suited to the encyclopedic tendencies of games. We see this in the Pokédex itself which, as a roughly rectangular, handheld device, echoes the device the player holds as they play.

In various ways then, *Pokémon* draws greatly from the *yōkai* tradition, which complicates any easy equivocation with the term ‘monster’; Foster describes the “ludic mode” of *yōkai*, that though they “may be strange and interstitial, they are not always scary: they are also about play” (2015, p. 91). We see this ludic mode in *Pokémon* too. *Pokémon* run the full gamut: adorable like Jigglypuff, playful like Squirtle, mischievous like Purrloin, noble like Zacian, scary like Gengar, hyperintelligent like Alakazam, enigmatic like Unown, or monstrous like Eternatus. ‘Monster’ is not a fully culturally transferrable term, and so it is not surprising that *monsutā*, as a loanword, does not quite seem to apply. Even though it might fit better, *yōkai* is not a term that would be familiar to a global audience. The choice to not use *yōkai* may also be about the freedom to create an all-new set of creatures that could be inspired by traditional *yōkai*, but did not have to conform to their conventions, and could also draw from other traditions. Sumilang-Engracia (2018) shows that although a significant number of *Pokémon* are directly folklore-inspired, and a significant proportion of those are specifically *yōkai*-inspired, around three quarters of them are not. They are based instead on animals, objects, even professions (such as Mr. Mime). The mode of the proliferation of *Pokémon* draws on the *yōkai* tradition, so the influence no doubt goes further than only the explicit inspirations, but there is clearly a desire for a degree of freedom from that tradition too.<sup>48</sup>

While *Poketto Monsutā* is still used in the games’ Japanese titles (e.g., *Pokémon Sword* is titled 『ポケットモンスター ソード』 [Poketto Monsutā Sōdo]), the *Pocket Monsters* translation in English was quickly abandoned, being already transformed into *Pokémon* by the time of the first generation’s release in the US. Perhaps this is because in the Western, Anglophone context, the label ‘monster’ did not quite seem to fit. It seems more right for *Pokémon* to have their own name, reflecting their occupying a cross-cultural space that does not

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<sup>47</sup> The current generation at the time of writing. *Sword* and *Shield* (2019a, 2019b) are the latest mainline games, with *Pokémon Legends: Arceus* (Game Freak, 2022) the latest release overall. The next mainline games, *Scarlet* and *Violet*, bringing in the ninth generation, are currently due to be released in late 2022.

<sup>48</sup> Notably, there are *Pokémon*-like series which do engage more explicitly with the *yōkai* tradition, such as *Yo-kai Watch* (2013–2020).

satisfy any of these candidate terms in either language. Pokémons are neither monsters nor *yōkai*—they are Pokémons. Interestingly, then, we struggle to fit Pokémons into any established mythic role. MONSTER, as in HERO SLAYS MONSTER for example, only seems appropriate in certain extraordinary circumstances. (And, in any case, it is a somewhat abstract instantiation, where SLAYS is rendered as CAPTURES and thus the monster is not vanquished but assimilated.) Likewise, while some Pokémons seem to fit neatly into YŌKAI folkloric roles, many do not. Foster's description of the ludic mode of *yōkai* is telling, however, suggesting that all Pokémons in fact fit into some form of YŌKAI mythic motifs. For example, at a minimum:

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PERSON ENCOUNTERS NEW.YŌKAI
→ PERSON CATALOGUES NEW.YŌKAI
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Compared with:

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TRAINER ENCOUNTERS NEW.POKÉMON
→ TRAINER CATALOGUES NEW.POKÉMON [WITH:POKÉDEX]
(→ TRAINER CAPTURES NEW.POKÉMON)
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In this sense, it is useful to turn to Foster's (2016) heuristic term, the *folkloresque*:

Simply put, the folkloresque is popular culture's own (emic) perception and performance of folklore. That is, it refers to creative, often commercial products or texts (e.g., films, graphic novels, video games) that give the impression to the consumer (viewer, reader, listener, player) that they derive directly from existing folkloric traditions. In fact, however, a folkloresque product is rarely based on any single vernacular item or tradition; usually it has been consciously cobbled together from a range of folkloric elements, often mixed with newly created elements, to appear as if it emerged organically from a specific source. In some cases the *form* rather than the *contents* provides this veneer of folklore; the folkloresque can reference folklore in either *langue* or *parole* or both. (2016, p. 5)

While we can get into the specifics of which Pokémons do and do not have direct *yōkai* influences and so on, taking a broader view we can see *Pokémon* as folkloresque. *Pokémon* clearly engages in some way with folkloric traditions including *yōkai*. Regardless of the intricacies—interesting though they are—the magic and wonder of the world is in large part because it is a folkloresque world come to life.

Foster also usefully notes that the perception and reception of the folkloresque depends very much upon who one is in relation to both the ‘folk’ and the ‘lore’. “To older Japanese consumers, for example, the ‘monsters’ of the *Pokémon* franchise are invented within a commercial context; for consumers from America and Europe, these same products often become associated with ‘Japanese folklore’” (2016, p. 16). Despite not typically having a great deal of knowledge regarding Japanese folklore, Western players of *Pokémon* engage with the games (and the rest of the franchise) as a product of Japanese folklore, as somehow drawn from it or representative of it.

## Meta-mythical cultural marketing

I have mentioned a number of times now that the game's original Japanese title, *Poketto Monsutā*, did not even make it outside of the country before being changed to the more well-known *Pokémon*. But that is far from the only change made to the franchise intended to make it more internationally appealing.

Allison notes that while *Pokémon* "were cute, [the concept] lacked what was considered a key ingredient in kids' fare in the States: a clear-cut theme of good versus evil" (2006, p. 243). In Japan, by contrast, "*Pokémon* is marked by greater ambiguity, as is Japanese children's entertainment more generally, and by avoidance of conflict" as well as a greater emphasis on "the pocket monsters themselves" (2006, p. 243). We might dismiss these changes as marketing decisions, but part of the reason for why the marketing is different is because they are operating in different mythical landscapes. *Pokémon*, being Japanese yet international from almost the very beginning, therefore gives us some insights into how the same material adapts to different mythical contexts.

How the *kawaii* *Pokémon* would translate to a US audience was unclear at first. As Allison (2006, p. 243) explains, "many adjustments were made in both the product and the promotion to ensure localization", though all of these decisions had to have the approval of their Japanese counterparts. On cuteness, Allison explains:

The overall image conjured by *Pokémon* in Japan was one of *yasashisa*—gentleness. In contrast, *Pokémon* was made brighter and more sharp-edged in the United States, as well as bigger and louder ("Everything is big and loud" in the States, an executive at Warner Brothers explained). (2006, p. 244)

As part of this, the English-language version of the anime focused more on Ash than Pikachu as a human hero was expected as part of a clear-cut clash between good and evil. Different mythic integers, motifs and themes have different prevalence in different societies, particularly in ones as distant as the US and Japan. Simple changes in marketing, presentation, voice acting and so on can foreground different themes quite effectively. In the English-language version of *Pokémon*, for instance, we may see motifs like HERO SLAYS MONSTER more pronounced, while the Japanese version focuses on the folkloresque, *yōkai*-related motifs.

This example refers to the anime and not the game. Although my focus here is on the games, there is an intentional bleed between the media of a franchise like *Pokémon*. Blom remarks, for example, that "a transmedial character like Pikachu cannot be discussed as a game character without attesting to its counterparts, since those counterparts inform the identity of the game character as well, and vice versa" (2020, p. 58). This does not mean that the *Pokémon* universe is perceived as a single, coherent, consistent, contiguous universe. As Blom (2018) notes in her analysis of *Overwatch* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2016), the game-world is not contingent on the other aspects of the transmedial universe, and indeed different parts can contradict each other. They are, however, still part of what Blom calls a "shared universe" (2018, p. 8) based on Benedict Anderson's (1983/2006) notion of *imagined communities*. In mythological terms, a shared universe might mean that different parts of the *Pokémon* universe inform each other on the level of integers, motifs and themes, even if they may

not directly follow from one another, or may directly contradict or seem to run in parallel universes to one another. This works at all stages of the mythic cycle. For example, a player of a *Pokémon* game who has (somehow) never heard of the anime will still be playing with Pokémons such as Pikachu whose *design* has been informed by that Pokémon's transmedial existence, by their other appearances in the shared universe, like *Yellow* allowing for a Pikachu who walks alongside the playable figure. This informing may be explicit on the level of executives approving or disapproving of certain uses of a Pokémon, or implicit in that a designer is influenced by other parts of the Pokémon universe in their implementation.

We can also see the difference that being transnational and transcultural has on the games' use of mythologies in how the games are localised. Aiden Ranford (2017) examines how market expectations are met by the ways in which games are translated from Japanese to English, including *Pokémon*. On the micro level, Ranford points out examples such as the name of the first town in *Pokémon X* and *Y* (Game Freak, 2013a, 2013b). In the Japanese versions, this town is called Asame Town, "almost certainly derived first from the character 朝 (*asa*), meaning 'morning,' and either 芽 (*me*), meaning 'bud,' or 目 (*me*) meaning 'eye'", while in English this town is called Vaniville, "possibly coming from 'vanilla'" (2017, p. 150). Different mythologies are then being drawn on here, such as vanilla as 'default' and 'boring', or the Japanese association with the dawn (Japan being known as the 'land of the rising sun' in English, and by the endonym Nihon or Nippon in Japanese, referring to the sun's origin). This example may not be so impactful in the grand scheme of things, but in aggregate the effect may be great, especially when localised with a consistently applied strategy to that effect. Ranford concludes:

Not only did those [mass-market] games [including *Pokémon X*] take great pains to remove culturally resistant elements such as foreign names and unpopular/unfamiliar character types and relationships, they supplemented the texts with domestic conceptual frameworks that significantly changed their meaning. (2017, p. 158)

For transnational, transcultural game series like *Pokémon*, it does not make sense to talk about a single artefact that all players experience. There is much less of a shared experience in this sense. The mythologies analysed in the series may be altered in both directions: both by players who may be experiencing the game from radically different cultures, and by developers and marketers who radically change the game *for* different cultures. Many of these decisions may be informed by, for example, Western myths of Japaneseness being catered to, adding yet another layer of response to and production of mythologies.

## Discussion

*Pokémon* offers a challenging case for a chapter on monsters. My purpose here is not to offer some answer to the question of whether Pokémons can rightly be called monsters or not. Rather, it is to explore what intuitively seems like an edge case. Pokémons are called, at least at the very beginning, monsters. Why? And why was that label dropped? This is not in itself the salient question, but offers a starting point. Why do Pokémons appear to have some

characteristics of the monstrous, but also a number of decidedly not monstrous characteristics. They have myriad varied powers, ranging from combat prowess to the cosmogenic, they feature as many of the franchise's antagonists, they pose existential threats to communities. And yet they also have a dog-like role as 'man's best friend', loyal companions, cute and fluffy pets, capable assistants, courageous heroes. Indeed, one of the lessons that can be taken from *Pokémon* is this very abundance. *Pokémon* are everything and more. This exposes 'monster' as a discursive label. Eternatus in *Pokémon Sword and Shield* is an apocalyptic monster, until it is pacified and captured, at which point it becomes a tool as part of the player's composite avatar (Backe, 2022). There is no point at which this is clearer than in *Pokémon: The First Movie*. Mewtwo clones Ash's Pikachu, creating a genetically identical *Pokémon*, but one who instead of being a cute, fiercely loyal and good-hearted *Pokémon* is instead an aggressive weapon of destruction. *Pokémon* demonstrates the point that creatures are not in themselves, fundamentally monsters, but that monster is a discursive label that can be attached to them under certain conditions. Indeed, it is a label very scarcely ascribed in earnest in the *Pokémon* universe.

What it may also tell us is that categories like monster can be culturally specific, can tap into different cultural traditions, and will therefore be received differently depending on the receiver. Is a *yōkai* a monster? It's complicated. Do we even share a concept of what monstrosity is, exactly? Not really. *Pokémon* seems to fit more in Foster's (2016) folkloresque. Broader than only monsters, *Pokémon* operates in a folkloresque mode whereby it is engaging with various folkloric traditions, sometimes directly transferring, sometimes adapting, sometimes inspired by, but overall in a mode that uses some particular folkloric motifs such as the cataloguing of *yōkai*. The mode of the games are folkloresque. Correspondingly, we might say that *Pokémon* are *monsteroesque*. They exhibit or can exhibit certain aspects of monstrosity. They can embody cultural anxieties, they have potentially unfathomable, terrifying power, they can embody excess. But they also often diverge from the monstrous, drawing as well from other mythologies such as pethood and partnership.

That *Pokémon* are so difficult to pin down conceptually in this way can best be understood by returning to the *as/through* aspect of my title. Approach *Pokémon* *through* myth proves difficult. That is, trying to apply existing mythological constructs and categories to *Pokémon* falls short. At best, we can apply something with an *-esque* caveat. We can trace similarities, affinities and influences undoubtedly, but no sole, clear-cut lineage emerges. Instead, *Pokémon* must also be approached *as* myth, taking the construction of *Pokémon* as a separate category unto itself. This understanding can be understood better (and is no doubt informed by) mythologies of monstrosity and *yōkai*, but ultimately *Pokémon* mean something separate within the gameworld. By approaching *Pokémon* *as* *Pokémon* in this way, we reveal what their loci of meaning are. For example, it is vital for *Pokémon* that the *Pokémon*-trainer relationship can be constituted in many different ways, because within this game-world the nature of that relationship becomes a key signifier both of the trainer's ethical standing as well as something of their personality: competitive, helpful, selfish, abusive, power-hungry, sad, thrill-seeking, and so on. The emulated mythologies *within* the *Pokémon* universe are just as important to interrogate as those that we can see to influence or feed into it. This is especially important because the franchise is such a transnational,

transcultural phenomenon. Different players will take very different things from it—most obviously, Japanese players will be much more familiar with the *yōkai* influences than the average British, *Pokémon*-playing teenager I was. How the games are presented in different markets may also prime players to perceive mythologies differently, such as how competition is valued, ideal trainer–*Pokémon* partnerships and so on.

## 6.6 Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice

*Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (Ninja Theory, 2017) follows the deeply personal journey of Senua, a Pict warrior travelling to Helheim to bargain with the goddess Hela for the life of her lost lover, Dillion. As can already be seen here, the game is quite outwardly rich in Pictish and Norse mythology and folklore. More than that, though, it is centrally preoccupied with modern-day mythologies surrounding mental illness in its portrayal of Senua's hallucinations. In both the folklore the game draws on and the mythologies of mental illness, *Senua's Sacrifice* puts mythologies in conflict with each other as a way of interrogating them. Pictish and Norse mythologies clash as do competing models of mental illness.

Though starting *in media res*, through the course of its narrative *Senua's Sacrifice* develops a rich backstory for its main character that makes her the nexus of the ancient and modern mythologies of the game. From a young age, Senua is marked as different because of her psychosis. Of course, her condition is not conceptualised as psychosis by her own community—this is a term applied by the developers, Ninja Theory, in paratexts on the game (for example in the description on the digital game storefront Steam: ‘Hellblade: Senua’s Sacrifice on Steam’, 2017), as well as in a content warning at the game’s opening. Senua’s mother, Galena, called it the Sight, a gift that allowed her to see what others could not. Her druid father, Zynbel, feared it, naming it the Darkness, a curse from the gods that doomed not only Senua but the whole village. In an attempt to dispel the curse, when Senua was five years old Zynbel burned Galena alive as an offering to appease the gods. Due to the trauma of witnessing this, as well as her young age at the time, Senua’s memory of this is repressed and twisted. Until late in the game, Senua believes that her mother took her own life to escape the Darkness and to protect her loved ones from its doom.

For the next years, Senua was locked away and physically and emotionally abused by Zynbel in efforts to expel the Darkness. During that time, Senua fell in love with a man called Dillion. When a plague hit the village, killing many, Senua blamed her Darkness and retreated into the wilds, determined to live as a hermit to protect her loved ones. There she meets Druth, a learned man who recently escaped enslavement at the hands of the Northmen. From him, Senua hears tales and customs from Norse folklore. Senua eventually returned home to find her village utterly destroyed by the Northmen, and Dillion sacrificed in a brutal blood eagle ritual.<sup>49</sup>

Senua takes Dillion’s skull<sup>50</sup> and, remembering Druth’s Norse tales, decides to bring it to Helheim and bargain with Hela for his life back. The game begins with Senua arriving on

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<sup>49</sup> A gruesome form of execution whereby an eagle is carved onto the victim, their ribs severed from their spine and their lungs pulled out to resemble wings. The practice’s historicity is debated and is now taken largely to be later Christian exaggeration and misunderstanding (see Frank, 1984; Murphy et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the blood eagle holds a prominent place in the contemporary image of the Vikings, for example being depicted twice in the popular TV show *Vikings* (Skogland, 2014; Woolnough, 2017).

<sup>50</sup> The head is popularly believed to have had special importance in Pictish and Celtic belief, perhaps as where the soul resides (Aldhouse-Green, 2015, pp. 33–34; A. Ross, 1960). This popular conception is criticised by some, however, such as Ian Armit, who argues against there being any “Celtic cult of the head”, at least in any pan-Celtic way (2012, p. 224).

the shores of Helheim, Dillion's skull in a bag strapped to her waist and Druth's instructions ringing in her ear.

With this framing of the game, two broad mythological traditions are drawn on: Pictish and Norse. Pictish mythology primarily manifests in Senua's history, explored in flashbacks, and on her person, such as carrying Dillion's skull. The setting and opponents are all drawn from Norse mythology, from the fire giant Surtr to the beast Garmr to the Northmen enemies. The game offers a modern interpretation of these fossilised mythologies, while also putting into conflict two competing mythologies of mental illness today.

## **Senua's psychosis mythology one: Inner demons**

Senua's psychosis manifests throughout all the challenges Senua faces as a playable figure in her journey to and through the underworld. From her affordances as a playable figure to the ways in which obstacles are overcome and to the enemies who are fought, much of the game comes across as a battle against Senua's 'inner demons'.

### **Competing for headspace: The Furies**

The voices in Senua's head are called the Furies and were the subject of much of the game's marketing. Essentially, these are voices that the player, as Senua, hears. The Furies were recorded using binaural audio, "a unique way of recording stereo in which a simulated human head, with microphones where the ears normally go, is used to record the signal ... This method can produce a convincing recording of a sound field" (Farkaš, 2018, p. 37). The effect is that the voices sound as if they come from very specific positions, making for a very convincing sound field, particularly when wearing headphones. One Fury may sound like it is whispering into your left ear, very close to you, while another sounds far away and to the right. One may be coming from above you, another breathing down the back of your neck. The Furies are not fought directly, but much of the time are hostile to Senua. They doubt, mock and chastise her:

"They're coming. Coward! Get out!"  
 "Idiot! You're so stupid!"  
 "She wants to go back! She's scared. Go back!"  
 "She will never make her way back. Everything will burn. How will she find her way back?"  
 (Ninja Theory, 2017)

These voices appear often as external, hostile entities, speaking about Senua in the third person. There is also a particular affect granted by the fact that these aural hallucinations are not the player's own. The Furies appear to be speaking with each other but also to the player. Notice how sometimes they will say "you" and sometimes "she" to refer to Senua. The result is a tension between player and playable figure, where sometimes the two are conflated and sometimes separated. Along these lines, PS Berge has discussed Senua's Darkness in terms of "the 'coinhabited avatar' trope" (2021, p. 35), alongside *Control* (Remedy Entertainment, 2019) and its playable figure Jesse Faden's paranormal guide/player-stand-in Polaris. Berge

argues that the cohabited avatar is used as part of an “outmersive” design strategy which “directs player attention *to* and *outside* of the game itself” to foster a critical distance (Berge, 2021, p. 35). For Berge, an important consequence of this strategy is to make the player question “the very dynamics of the game-avatar relationship” (2021, p. 38). By a series of direct acknowledgements as such, “the game implies that the player is one of the many voices in Senua’s head” (2021, p. 40). This complicates the notion that the player can have direct and total control over Senua as a playable figure:

The setup of the voices puts the player in a precarious situation for thinking about embodiment. After all, they believe they are playing *as* Senua—and yet the implication that the player is a voice, one she directly acknowledges and even becomes enraged with, complicates that embodiment. The player’s gaze and place are called out, questioned, and recontextualized: the player is at once a spectator, a guide, and a voice among many, not to be trusted. (2021, p. 40)

In this way, the player is estranged from Senua even as they are drawn in. The binaural recording provides the player with an implied position in the soundstage of being Senua, yet the game pushes the player out at times in the ways Berge describes. This creates a destabilising foundation for the player–playable-figure relationship, one which brings into question Senua’s agency—if we are made aware that we are distanced from Senua but still in control of her actions, it reinforces the idea that her inner demons are to some extent taking control.

## The Northmen: Faceless Nordic monstrosities

All of the game’s enemies are based on Norse mythology, which is particularly salient with regard to the bosses. In Norse mythology, Garmr is the guardian of Hel’s gate, Surtr the fire giant who will battle Freyr during Ragnarök and Hela the goddess of the underworld. The boss Valravn is taken from the supernatural raven of Danish folklore. The abundant normal enemies the player faces—‘mobs’—are simply called Northmen, though far from being what we might imagine as early medieval north Germanic people, they are giant, monstrous and have twisted monstrosities in the place of their faces and heads.

Primarily, these opponents serve as a literal manifestation of the inner demons. “Is this what Hel is?” asks the narrator, “a world shaped by Senua’s nightmares?” (Ninja Theory, 2017), hinting at the hallucinatory nature of the world. José Guilherme Abrão Firmino (2018, p. 345) marks combat as one of the recurring ways in which Senua’s hallucinations manifest, as it is implied that the warriors are not actually there. This quite straightforwardly literalises the metaphor of fighting one’s inner demons. Here we have HERO FIGHTS MONSTER where MONSTER=PSYCHOSIS. Senua’s psychosis fills in the slot usually filled by an external adversary.

It is also significant that the Northmen lack faces. That the face is important to us probably goes without saying, with many studies confirming the importance of the face in how we communicate with each other (e.g., Currie & Little, 2009; Ekman, 1970; Frith, 2009). For this reason, it is unsurprising that the face becomes an important aspect of the construction of the monster. For example, Alexa Wright observes:

Ancient systems such as astrology and physiognomy also treat the body and face as codified structures that can be visibly related to the cosmos, to the order of society as a whole or to the character of a particular individual. (2013, p. 47)

Despite all empirical evidence failing to support the claims of physiognomy, it continues to find purchase in mythologisations of monstrosity, whether explicitly or implicitly. Wright (2013, pp. 125–163) demonstrates this in her case studies of modern killers Myra Hindley, Ted Bundy and Anders Breivik, whose faces either unsettlingly *defied* their monstrous image and actions (Bundy’s ‘handsome’ face, for example) or were perceived to *corroborate* their being labelled a monster (Hindley’s mugshot, for example). In *Senua’s Sacrifice*, all of the monsters lack faces, obscured either by a mask or by grotesque growths. The only faces the player does see are Senua’s, figures from her memories like Druth and Dillion, and Hela. Hela would be the exception here, as the game’s primary antagonist, but this in fact comes back to support the point. Hela is revealed at the end to be a representation of Senua herself, the assimilation of whom corresponds to Senua’s accepting of her psychosis and the loss of Dillion. All of Senua’s other inner demons are dehumanised and marked as monstrous by the unsettling lack of a face. OBSCURED~MISSING.FACE becomes an important partial of MONSTER in the game, hinting from the beginning that there is something different about Hela.

## The Darkness: Heart of the possessing force

In the discussion of monster types, I note that the difference between the *monster from within* and the *monster from without* can be subtle. An invading force—such as demonic possession—would be a *monster from without*, but can ‘infect’ the host, turning them into a monster themselves, which may then be perceived as a *monster from within*. The distinction is not always clear or knowable. But where it is apparent the salient difference is whether the entity is themselves considered evil, or whether they are perceived to have been ‘taken over’ or infected by evil that originates externally. This may affect, for example, whether the entity is considered a victim or not, as worthy or needing of help or destruction or banishment (and whether that destruction or banishment is considered a good or bad outcome). In *Senua’s Sacrifice*, this is posited as a *monster from without* in the form of the Darkness, or the Shadow, by Zynbel. Jodie Austin notes that “the hallucinations [Senua] experiences seem to have preceded the events of the game. In an earlier encounter the game suggests that Senua’s abilities were inherited from her mother” (2021). However, we can see in Zynbel’s brutal attempts to ‘purge’ Senua of the curse that it is still perceived—at least by Zynbel—as an external possession, even if one passed down a generation. The narrator says near the beginning of the game:

Poor Senua. The darkness does not bargain. It does not reason. It is rot. And now it has taken hold, it will spread towards her head, the seat of the soul, until there is nothing left of her. ... The hardest battles are fought in the mind. That is what Dillion taught her. With every defeat, the dark rot will grow and

soon it will take her soul. But, for now at least, she still has control of her mind. And she will fulfil her vow, whatever the cost. (Ninja Theory, 2017)

As the narrator suggests, this external force also manifests in the form of a dark rot that seems to infect Senua early in the game. Senua's right arm begins to have a black rot growing up it, and the game warns the player via text that "the dark rot will grow each time you fail. If the rot reaches Senua's head, her quest is over and all progress will be lost" (Ninja Theory, 2017) (Figure 13).



Figure 13. The beginning of the dark rot permadeath warning.

This warning appears to suggest that the game has permadeath. Each death spreads the rot further and once it reaches her head "all progress will be lost". In fact, the rot does not reach Senua's head until a scripted sequence at the very end of the game. There is no permadeath in gameplay. This statement is then misleading at best (strictly speaking, Senua's quest *does* end once it reaches her head) and has been received in a variety of ways. Firmino (2018, p. 342) stresses that by using text the game breaks immersion to introduce the supposed permadeath, making it feel more real or trustworthy, even if we may still suspect it within the context of psychosis. As a result, Firmino (2018, p. 345) argues, this represents the fact that her trauma and hallucinations are ultimately inescapable. Sarah Beal describes it as "emotional manipulation of the player [which] increases the emotional intensity of the game" (2022, p. 181). Austin draws on the critiques of Lacina (2017) and Faulkner (2017), calling it a potential issue of "ludological consent" (2021) and drawing attention to the frequent metaphorization of Senua's psychosis as rot, darkness and monsters.

Debates about whether this metaphorization is problematic or not aside, to me this seems a clear mythologisation of the *monster from without*. The game draws on this conception of external forces intruding into a person and attempting to corrupt their being:

MONSTER ENTERS PERSON  
 MONSTER CONTROLS~TURNS~TORMENTS PERSON  
 → MONSTER IS SLAIN~BANISHED~ASSIMILATED

More specifically:

DARKNESS ENTERS SENUA  
 DARKNESS TORMENTS SENUA  
 → DARKNESS IS ASSIMILATED

However, Zynbel would have it that the Darkness is purged, not assimilated. But that never seems to be Senua's goal, perhaps due to her mother's counternarrative explored in the next section. Her goal is not really to assimilate the Darkness either. Her goal is to bring her beloved Dillion back to life, one of the only people she felt truly understood by. If not assimilation, Senua seems to fatalistically accept the Darkness as an inescapable fact of her being, to be overcome in pursuit of her quest. "My world *has* died!" she exclaims in a conversation with Druth (Ninja Theory, 2017). It is only at the very end of the game when she relinquishes herself of responsibility for Dillion's death and accepts that he is forever gone that we can see the Darkness assimilated when Senua and Hela merge into one.

Reading *Senua's Sacrifice* as a narrative of Senua *overcoming* her inner demons can lead into the notion of the *supercrip*. This refers to a stereotypical representation of a disabled person, involving "overcoming, heroism, inspiration, and the extraordinary", according to Sami Schalk (2016, p. 73). Austin (2021) links Senua's *Sight* (not Darkness) to the supercrip stereotype (I examine this aspect more in the next section). Non-academic writings on the game have along similar lines criticised the game's treatment of disability, albeit without using the term (e.g., Faulkner, 2017; Lacina, 2017). Supercrip narratives "focus on individual attitude, work, and perseverance rather than on social barriers, making it seem as if all effects of disability can be erased if one merely works hard enough" (Schalk, 2016, p. 73).<sup>51</sup> Schalk traces the term's origins to "within the disability rights community in the mid- to late 1970s as a pejorative term for overachieving people with disabilities" (2016, p. 74). This has two key impacts.

The first is as an atomising mythology. By valorising certain individuals who have 'overcome' their disability, it implies that others with that disability can (and perhaps should) too, if they just work hard enough. For example, as part of the discourse surrounding difficulty and accessibility that emerged around the release of *Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice* (FromSoftware, 2019), one popular YouTube video is titled, 'Disabled quadriplegic shows why Sekiro doesn't need an easy mode' (Limitlessquad, 2019). The video's description reads:

People saying this game is to [sic] hard and want an easy mode. I even saw one post using disabled people with poor motor functions as an excuse for an

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<sup>51</sup> Schalk does, however, warn against dismissing outright all supercrip representations, arguing that "the term has become, in many cases, a predetermined marker for critical dismissal rather than engagement" (2016, p. 84).

easy mode. So here's the Corrupted Monk done by me a quadriplegic. (Limitlessquad, 2019)

At the time of writing, the video has over 750,000 views and is one of the most popular posts of all time on the game's Reddit forum. This 'if I can do it, so can you' attitude minimises the issues posed by disabilities. Rather than the supercrip being seen as exceptional, such examples are taken to argue that *other* disabled people use their disability as an excuse.

The second is that in the designation of a supercrip is an implied *lack*. As Schalk explains:

Scholars tend to agree that supercrip narratives emphasize (over) compensation for the perceived "lack" created by disability. Several scholars assert that supercrip narratives not only set unreal expectations for people with disabilities to "overcome" the effects of their disabilities through sheer force of will, but also, simultaneously, these representations depend upon our ableist culture's low standards for the lives of disabled people. (2016, p. 74)

To return to the previous example, that a disabled person is valorised for beating a boss implies that we did not think they could do it, else we would find it as relatively unimpressive as when a person without a disability does. Strangely then, the supercrip construction both implies that disability is disabling in that there are lower expectations for what they can do, *and* contends that disability is not actually disabling in that one can overcome it if they just try hard enough.

We might posit this supercrip construction broadly as this:

DISABLED.PERSON OVERCOMES DISABILITY TO DO:SOMETHING.EXTRAORDINARY

Or, for Senua:

SENUA OVERCOMES DARKNESS[~PSYCHOSIS] TO BATTLE THROUGH HELHEIM

We are invited to admire Senua's perseverance despite the internal challenges she faces. In a hallucination, Druth at some point says, "Hel will not give you the answers you want. But you mustn't look away from the horror it does offer, because you cannot overcome suffering if you refuse to look at it!" (Ninja Theory, 2017). Austin is right to observe that, in contrast to characters like Harley Quinn, "*Hellblade* swaps the crazed nymphomaniac for the noble warrior ... Senua's identity as a warrior stands apart from her pathology" (2021). But while not core to her identity, it seems to me that part of Senua's nobility is in her dogged perseverance in spite of the pursuing Darkness. The Darkness at times entices Senua to give in, for example:

*Why do you still fight on? Maybe you too should suffer with your brethren in this rot and let your blood seep into the seas and rivers of Hel. Isn't that what you deserve after all you've done? Give the darkness what it wants. Let it swallow your soul and destroy all that you are... Why are you fighting for someone who is already dead...? Just look around you... What hope is there for him even if his soul could be rescued, do you think he would thank you for what you have done to him, to his friends, to his father...?!* (Ninja Theory, 2017)

The supercrip interpretation can no doubt be argued for here, but also does not seem wholly convincing. An important addition to the previous supercrip construction is an implication for others:

DISABLED.PERSON OVERCOMES DISABILITY TO DO:SOMETHING.EXTRAORDINARY  
[← OTHER.DISABLED.PEOPLE CAN~SHOULD OVERCOME DISABILITY]

There is an implication in the supercrip notion of a shared disabled experience, and that the achievements of one demonstrates something about the rest. This seems difficult to see in a game like *Senua's Sacrifice*, depicted as not only a completely personal journey, but one in which there are no other characters who are not hallucinations—Senua is completely alone. This, combined with the setting and time period, makes it hard to claim that Senua's overcoming truly amounts to an expectation of others. Nor is it the case that Senua's journey appears 'easy' if not for her disability (reflecting the lowered expectations of society for disabled people). While we no doubt have SENUA OVERCOMES DARKNESS[~PSYCHOSIS] as a motif, and this is a part of her nobility, the extrapolation that makes the supercrip construction damaging seems much less pronounced, if present at all. The notion outlined here refers to Schalk's first two types of supercrip narratives—drawn from Amit Kama (2004)—the “regular supercrip narrative” whereby a disabled person is lauded for doing otherwise ordinary things (2016, p. 79), and the “glorified supercrip narrative” whereby a disabled person accomplishes things even able-bodied people would rarely attempt (2016, p. 80). Schalk's third type becomes relevant in the next section.

## **Senua's psychosis mythology two: Psychosis as superpower**

The Furies can also be friendly, encouraging and helpful at times, both in terms of what they say but also as useful hints and guides. For example, during a puzzle a voice might say, “there’s a way in. Look up! She’s so clever! Go up into the mountain. Just up there” (Ninja Theory, 2017). During a fight, voices will reliably tell Senua to “duck!” when a particular enemy attack begins. They will warn Senua to “watch out” when an unseen enemy is about to strike from behind. More than friendly and encouraging, these particular functions for the voices makes real a mythology that competes with the inner demon construction, the notion that her neurodivergence actually makes her uniquely *powerful*. The inner demons notion is constructed as the Darkness by Senua’s father, while this contrary framing stems from her mother, who calls it the Sight.

### **True sight: Senua sees the truth**

This relates to Schalk’s third type of supercrip: “the superpowered supercrip” (2016, p. 81). “This is primarily a fiction, television, or film representation of a character who has abilities or ‘powers’ that operate in direct relationship with or contrast to their disability” (2016, p. 81). These powers compensate or overcompensate for the character’s disability. Schalk uses the real-life example of former Paralympian (now convicted murderer) Oscar Pistorius, who during his athletics career received the nickname Blade Runner. Schalk (2016, p. 81) argues

that Pistorius' superpowered supercrip construction began when, after becoming Paralympic champion, he attempted to enter nondisabled competitions too. Amidst this attempt, arguments abounded that his prosthetic running blades actually conferred an *advantage* over able-bodied runners. The construction is much more common in fiction, however. Within fictionalised representations, Schalk makes a distinction between superpowered supercrips who, despite their powers, are still marked as disabled, and those who are not:

We might also consider, for example, the difference between Spiderman, who gets his hyper-able, spider-like powers after being bitten by an irradiated spider, and Daredevil, who goes blind from exposure to radioactive material, yet develops increased power in his other senses. While Daredevil's disabling accident continues to mark him as disabled, Spiderman's does not. In our discussions of supercrip narratives, then, we should consider what constitutes disability (materially and socially) in the context of high-tech assistive devices, altered abilities, and fictional worlds. (2016, p. 82)

When Senua's psychosis is framed as Sight rather than Darkness, it becomes this type of superpowered supercrip construction. The powers conferred in the Sight compensate for the psychosis. In addition to the helpful Furies, Senua's Sight acts as one of the core mechanics for solving puzzles in the game. By activating the Sight, the player solves puzzles by lining up the ethereal outline of a Norse rune with a part of the environment that lines up with the shape when seen from a specific perspective (Figure 14). A number of reviewers and commentators (e.g., Licina, 2017) refer to this mechanic as pareidolia, seeing patterns and connections where they do not exist. However, Stang (2018b) prefers to call it "true sight" because pareidolia refers more to seeing *faces* in things. True sight also has more of a grounding in the games tradition, being prominently featured in *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax & Arneson, 1974), and is linked more clearly with its reality-shaping, superpower nature. Senua's ability here is not about seeing patterns which *do not* exist, but precisely about seeing patterns which *do* exist, and which have real and tangible effects in the gameworld.

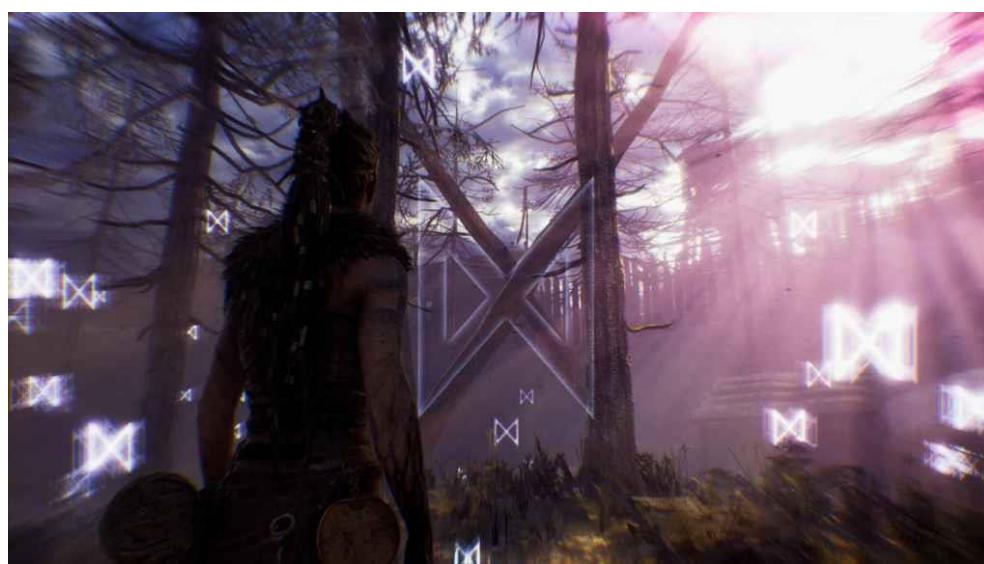


Figure 14. The player lines up the rune **M** (transliterated as *d* and meaning 'day') with a grouping of trees.

In this sense, the Sight quite directly compensates for her psychosis. If, as the narrator tells us at the beginning, psychosis means that “Senua’s reality is twisted” (Ninja Theory, 2017), then the Sight as a puzzle-solving mechanics demonstrates that she actually has a unique ability to see the *truth*. She may only progress by using the Sight to see the hidden world as it really is. This power compensates directly for the perceived lack brought about by psychosis. Like Daredevil, however, Senua’s psychosis is not erased by the Sight. The narrator tells us that Galena “taught Senua to see the weave that binds the world together and it was beautiful”, and Dillion asks Senua, “would you give up the beautiful world that you and only you can see just to be rid of your nightmares?” (Ninja Theory, 2017). Senua’s psychosis is in this way construed as an inescapable burden, but one which reveals to her something true and aesthetically valuable.

As Stang (2018b) notes, however, the notion of ‘true sight’ is not necessarily related to the superpowered supercrip, stemming rather from *Dungeons & Dragons* as a magical power. She pinpoints the introduction of true sight to the first issue of *The Dragon* magazine. In this context, true sight is a *Dungeons & Dragon* spell with which “one may also see invisible, displaced, and astral objects” (Aronson, 1976, p. 23). In *Senua’s Sacrifice*, Stang observes that Senua’s true sight stems from her mental illness, which “is framed as both a gift and a curse” (2018b). As such, Senua’s Sight brings together two distinct mythologies. On the one hand, true sight, which as part of mythology posits that there is an unseen reality that can only be accessed with magic and not through natural means. On the other, the superpowered supercrip, which reframes disability as a supernatural gift granting unique powers. In this case, the supernatural gift is a form of true sight, with which Senua can see a truth behind the distorted world. These two strands could be outlined as such:

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PERSON HAS DISABILITY
DISABLED.PERSON SEES:WORLD DIFFERENTLY
→ DISABLED.PERSON SOLVES DILEMMA

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And:

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MAGIC.USER USES TRUE.SIGHT
→ MAGIC.USER SEES:HIDDEN.WORLD

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In *Senua’s Sacrifice*, these become combined:

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SENUA HAS SIGHT[~PSYCHOSIS]
→ SENUA SEES:HIDDEN.WORLD
→ SENUA PROGRESSES THROUGH:HELHEIM

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In this way, Senua’s psychosis is linked with magical abilities, drawing on already existing magical mythologies to support the notion.

## **Magical runes: Mythologies of runic systems as a prism for magic**

Another way in which Senua’s psychosis-as-superpower is reinforced by other mythologies is through magical runes. As mentioned, many of the game’s puzzles are solved using runes overlaid onto the environment. The runes used are from the Elder Futhark, the system of

writing used by Northwest Germanic peoples between approximately the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. More than just a utilitarian system of writing, however, runic systems like Elder Futhark (perhaps in particular Elder Futhark) are tied up with folklore, religion and magic (Simek, 1993/2007, p. 268). For example, the rune in Figure 14, , transliterates to the Latin letter ‘d’, but was called *\*dagaz* in Proto-Germanic, meaning ‘day’. The rune , corresponding to ‘t’, is called *\*tīwaz*, referring to the Proto-Germanic god who would become Týr in Norse religion, the god who sacrificed his hand to Fenrir in order to bind him. An analogue would be if the Latin letter ‘j’ were not called ‘j’, but ‘Jesus’. As such, individual runes take on this explicitly religious quality in themselves. They hold meaning, resonance and power on their own. Rudolf Simek (1993/2007, p. 268) notes that carving runes could be used to call on the gods for help in battle, charms for wealth and happiness or black magic curses. Furthermore, Odin is said to have acquired the knowledge of the runes and their magic after sacrificing his eye in Mimir’s well, spearing himself with his spear, Gungnir, and hanging himself from Yggdrasil (Simek, 1993/2007, pp. 249, 269). Such a sacrifice by the All-Father for the knowledge of runes shows how central and powerful they were deemed to be.

More crucially for the point here, the inherent magic of runes is their prevailing mythology today, perhaps more so in games than anywhere else. Maja Bäckvall (2019) remarks that “runes live a life of their own in popular culture”, and that no matter how ahistorical, anachronistic, or intentionally fictional a runic system’s representation is, “calling them ‘runes’ is a conscious choice, meant to evoke a certain response in the audience” (2019, p. 201). She reads the links in various games between runes and Vikings, of course, but also magic, the “rugged and dark” and masculinity (2019, p. 210). Bäckvall provides numerous examples in her chapter, but an example of my own would be the runes in *Diablo II: Lord of Destruction* (Blizzard North, 2001). Runes in the game can be found as loot and inserted into items with ‘sockets’ to enhance them with magical powers. A string of runes socketed in a specific order can form a ‘runeword’, an enhancement much greater than the sum of its runes. The runes Lem, Ko and Tir, inserted in that order, form the runeword Wealth, ‘LemKoTir’. Though this is a fictional runic system, Bäckvall’s observation that the choice to call them ‘runes’ rather than a ‘script’, ‘hieroglyphs’, ‘iconography’, ‘alphabet’ or what have you is significant because it imports the existing mythology of runes into the fictional runic system. Even if the typical player is not well-versed in the Proto-Germanic roots of the rune they see onscreen in *Senua’s Sacrifice*, this mythologising work has been done over the centuries such that runes as a whole are inextricably tied with magic.

Included also in the myth of the rune is the rune as pre-Christian pagan. This is an association which is not wholly historical, as Bäckvall also points out. For example, she notes that “the majority of Swedish runestones were raised as a show of Christianity” (2019, p. 208). Nonetheless, the use of runestones typically evokes both an arcane, ancient time (for example, the script of the ancient and secretive language of Tolkien’s dwarves, Khuzdul, is adapted from the Elder Futhark) and a pre-Christian paganism, as in Bäckvall’s (2019, p. 208) example of Harald Hardrada, a decidedly Christian king of Norway, gifting runes in *Civilization VI* (Firaxis Games, 2016) while espousing Odin-worship. The use of runes in *Senua’s Sacrifice*, then, may also be being used to underscore the absence of Christianity and indicate

a time abyss, situating the game more clearly in both a pagan Norse setting as well as within a mythical past.

*Senua's Sacrifice* uses the existing mythology of magical runes to corroborate the psychosis-as-superpower construction, as well as to place the setting in a mythical time and place. That is to say that the mythology of runes is drawn upon in service of the construction of another mythology. Magical runes are a prism for Senua's Sight. The already magical association we have of runes aids the naturalising of psychosis as true sight. The effect does work the other way as well—that Senua's Sight is a supernatural power helps to reinforce that the runes she uses are magical—but I would argue that the equation is lopsided in the other direction.

## Pictish folklore

Senua herself and her flashbacks retain their Pictish heritage despite the predominantly Norse setting of the game. Far less is known about the wider Celtic folklore and religions—let alone specifically Pictish—than about the Norse, but there is, of course, plenty of speculation which has fed into popular conceptions and mythologies. An important one here is the point made previously about the head. There is a suggestion, now common in popular understandings of Celtic mythology and religion but not agreed on by all scholars, that the human head held special importance to them, perhaps as being where the soul is housed. It is therefore significant that Senua carries Dillion's skull into Helheim, rather than any other body part, ashes, or a talisman, for example.

Senua also carries with her a polished iron mirror, hung from her hip next to Dillion's skull. It is speculated that in Celtic mythology, the Otherworld (a spirit world, an afterlife without a separated Heaven and Hell or equivalent) may have been perceived as a *reflection* of the ordinary world, and so reflective surfaces—particularly water—served as access points, gateways or windows into the Otherworld (Aldhouse-Green, 2015, pp. 176–178). Again, the historicity of this understanding is debated, particularly if we look specifically at the Picts, but this is nonetheless a popular conception, one which seems to be a part of *Senua's Sacrifice*. Senua's mirror—also used as a HUD feature to indicate when a combat power is available—may therefore hold a mythic connection to the Otherworld, where Dillion presumably resides. Or perhaps it is where Dillion *should* reside. His ritual sacrifice at the hands of the Northmen appears to have taken him to the ‘wrong’ afterlife, to Helheim instead of the Pictish Otherworld. Recognising the symbolic potency of burial rituals today as well as in ancient cultures, we recognise Dillion's ritual sacrifice by the enemy to be profoundly sacrilegious. Senua having a mirror, an access point to the Otherworld, close to Dillion's head is likely important for saving his soul from Hel.

That Senua's mirror is linked to her Focus ability is important. The Focus ability has two main functions depending on the gamestate. During exploration and puzzle-solving, Focus is used to zoom in and focus on things in the gameworld. It can be used to trigger narration relating to Lorestones, which act as additional information about Norse customs, to find runes in the environment and to align objects. For example, a bridge can be repaired by using Focus to align floating shards which, seen from a particular perspective, come together.

Likewise, the rune alignment mechanic discussed previously works through Focus. In combat, Focus is a resource accumulated with successful moves, both offensive and defensive. When Senua has enough Focus, her mirror flashes, indicating that she has a charge of Focus. She can have up to three charges. When a charge is triggered, all enemies in the vicinity move in slow-motion, while Senua continues to move at full speed. Focus also has some special uses, such as breaking the boss Valravn out of his shadow form.

In gameplay the mirror is strictly speaking only visually associated with Focus. That is, it only indicates things about Focus to the player, rather than having any more fundamental connection. However, in the context of Pictish folklore this is significant. It suggests that Senua's extraordinary power of Focus is both inherent to her and a facet of her Pictish beliefs. Like with magical runes, it uses an already supernatural mythology in service of her psychosis-as-superpower. The mythologised mirror acts in part as justification for her supernatural Focus powers. Crucially, while runes are the core to the puzzles for Senua to solve, it is her Focus that is her intrinsic power, and so Senua's abilities are more linked to her Pictish self than to the Norse environment.

## Discussion

*Senua's Sacrifice* posits two competing mythologies of mental illness. On the one hand, *psychosis-as-superpower*, whereby her disability is reframed as a unique, powerful gift. On the other, *psychosis-as-inner-demon*, whereby her psychosis is construed as a monstrous, invading force. We can describe them as such:

### *Psychosis-as-superpower*

- A. PSYCHOSIS=SIGHT
- B1. SENUA HAS SIGHT
- B2. SENUA SEES HIDDEN.WORLD
- B3. SENUA SOLVES PUZZLES
- [← B4. HIDDEN.WORLD=TRUE.WORLD]
- C. SENUA FIGHTS NORTHMEN WITH:AID.OF:SIGHT

### *Psychosis-as-inner-demon*

- A. PSYCHOSIS=DARKNESS
- B1. DARKNESS ENTERS SENUA
- B2. DARKNESS TORMENTS SENUA [VIA:FURIES & TRAUMATIC.MEMORIES & HALLUCINATIONS]
- C. SENUA FIGHTS NORTHMEN[=AGENTS.OF:DARKNESS]
- D. SENUA ASSIMILATES DARKNESS

These two constructions essentially posit a hero-versus-monster dynamic. *Psychosis-as-superpower* is essentially a heroic construction of Senua, whereby her intrinsic powers allow her to succeed. *Psychosis-as-inner-demons* represents the monster to be vanquished by the hero. However, even as it sets this dichotomy up the game makes clear that it must ultimately be collapsed, rather than one side winning out. That is, the solution is not for the hero to

vanquish the monster, but to accept the monster as a part of oneself without letting it dominate. Furthermore, the heroism is undermined by the wider context. Senua completes this journey alone and for no one but herself. There is no greater cause or altruism that we would normally expect in heroic constructions. Indeed, there is little notion of self-sacrifice. While Senua no doubt suffers, she states at a number of points that she essentially has nothing left to lose, and so cannot be said to be making a meaningful sacrifice in service of a heroic cause.

For those reasons, it seems to me that *Senua's Sacrifice* positions monstrosity as its semantic centre. Note how in the constructions outlined above only *psychosis-as-inner-demons* contains within it the final move of the game, for Senua to accept Dillion's death and to assimilate the Darkness. The Sight is necessary to her being and for her progression. As noted in [ $\leftarrow$  HIDDEN.WORLD=TRUE.WORLD], it is implied that the hidden world Senua sees with the Sight constitutes some form of truth, because it is what 'solves' the puzzles and allows her to progress. (These being 'puzzles' with a 'solution' confers a truth value to the solution.) But the quest is ultimately one of overcoming or accepting her inner demons rather than, for example, saving her village using the Sight. Senua must grapple with her own monstrosity. Indeed, the only reason she was not killed in the Viking raid on her village like the rest of its denizens is because she had already abjected herself from that society, believing herself to be a monster or possessed by one. She could only reach a resolution ultimately by confronting that inner monstrosity, rather than trying to escape from it.

The game raises these two mythologies of mental illness and questions both by putting them in conflict with each other. Interestingly, the game does not try to make drastic alterations to the mythologies themselves—critiquing or undermining them for example—but rather simply holds up two mythologies that are at odds with each other. Their very coexistence within the same mythical space is enough to challenge them, as we begin to question the built-in assumptions of both. Senua's psychosis is the cause of both her trauma and her extraordinary power. Something to be both excised and harnessed. These seem paradoxical and so cause us to reflect on both. Returning to the cycle of mythology whereby new work draws on an existing mythology, affirms its existence, does something with the mythology, and then that feeds back into society, we learn here that affirming multiple overlapping mythologies can in itself work on those mythologies.

The game's ending works as a counter to both these mythologies, demonstrating that neither one is true, but that neither is entirely false either. There must be synthesis. The paradoxes that arise when these mythologies are compared reflect the paradoxes of the real conditions themselves. For this reason, many praise *Senua's Sacrifice* for its nuance. Beal, for example, notes that "Senua's symptoms are represented in a more holistic manner, and she is never portrayed as broken or dangerous" (2022, p. 184). Joseph Fordham and Christopher Ball (2019) discuss the game's depiction of mental health using terms like "serious", "respectful", "educational" and "empathetic". Arienne Ferchaud et al. (2020) note that the game has been widely received as "accurate", "sensitive" (2020, p. 2) and "thoughtful" (2020, p. 4). Terms such as these are often ascribed to the game's eschewing of, as Stang puts it, "problematic stereotypes and tired tropes" (2018b). In my thinking, these stereotypes and tropes tend to spring from these embedded mythologies—in this case both of superpower-conditions and monstrous invaders—simple, clear, straightforward expressions of naturalised conceptions

of mental illness. In holding these up, problematising them both and demanding synthesis, *Senua's Sacrifice* primarily tackles the metaphor of mental illness as monster to fight, showing in the end that it is one who cannot be defeated and must be accepted.

What we can also observe here is the palimpsest of mythology here. Much of my discussion here has focused on these two mythologies of mental illness and related discourse surrounding disability. But recall that within the gameworld itself, Senua is *not* ‘mentally ill’, she does not have ‘psychosis’ and she is not perceived as ‘disabled’. She is *different*, no doubt, but this is conceptualised either as a gift—the Sight—or as monstrous possession—the Darkness or the Shadow. While ‘disability’ implies a lack (*dis-* is a negative prefix and so disability is the negation of ability, the *lack* of ability),<sup>52</sup> both the Sight and the Darkness imply an addition, an excess. She has *abundant* powers of perception, or she has *abundant* evil due to the invading spirit. The reading of Senua as disabled therefore comes solely from our modern mythic environment. Note how most of the ways in which Senua is coded as disabled or mentally ill come from either paratext or from the game-as-played rather than from within the fictional universe. We are told via the game’s Steam page or on the back of the box that she has psychosis. The game begins with text stating that it is a representation of psychosis. Within the game, the disabled moments for the player are experienced usually through breaks in gameplay. We are disabled from playing to show a cutscene of Senua suffering, for example. Or the permadeath bluff near the beginning of the game which can be read as a metaphor for mental illness (Fordham & Ball, 2019, p. 8)—this is delivered via text overlay.

What we seem to have then is a layering of modern mythologies of mental illness over these older imported constructions, and the overlaying of them in itself connects those older constructions to mental illness, even if they do not necessarily do so inherently. We also see in this then the directionality. The older mythological traditions are deployed in service of Ninja Theory’s more modern mythologies. This is a game *about* conceptualisations of psychosis, rather than Norse or Pictish mythology. It is for that reason that both constructions at the beginning begin with a declaration that PSYCHOSIS=SIGHT or DARKNESS. We *begin* with the conception that Senua has psychosis and are *then* asked to reframe that in two ways. The game ends with the dissolution of all the monsters. The monsters fade away along with the traditional mythological setting, exposing them as just that: mythologies. In doing so, and in requiring synthesis, the game also prompts us to see these modern conceptions of psychosis as mythologies too, different from Norse and Pictish conceptions, but constructed mythologies nonetheless. However, we should also note the discrepancy there. The use of ancient mythologies *as* mythologies is much more explicit, while the modern mythologies of mental

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<sup>52</sup> Some in disability studies urge us to conceptualise disability differently than it has traditionally been thought of, which is as a medical or moral deficiency inherent to the person (Goodley, 2017, p. 6). Dan Goodley (2017) observes that scholarship and activism now tend to distinguish *impairment* from *disability*, with the former being a functional physical, mental or sensory limitation and the latter being the limited ability to take part in normal life on an equal footing with others—i.e., one *is* not disabled, one *is disabled by society* on the basis of their *impairments* (2017, p. 9). I wholeheartedly agree with this from both an analytical and a political angle. However, whether constructed as inherent to the person or social constructed, the term still implies a lack, and it remains that Senua is not construed as deficient by either perspective in the game, even if we would now consider her disabled by her society.

illness are more implicit. This juxtaposition in itself may serve to further the naturalisation of the modern mythologies. That is, the inclusion of these ancient (and therefore more alien) mythologies demands explicitation, while the modern ones do not.

## 6.7 Ghost of Tsushima

*Ghost of Tsushima* (Sucker Punch Productions, 2020a) does not feature what we would typically think of as monsters. The game depicts the Mongol invasion of Japan in 1274 CE and both invaders and defenders are depicted as at least physically human. The Mongols are not supernatural, deformed, and so on. (This is excepting the later-released multiplayer DLC, *Legends*, in which players cooperatively fight *oni* alongside Mongols, and the two are sometimes intertwined. I will address this later.) But monstrosity is broader than physical qualities and, arguably, is not defined by them, rather they are often emblematic of that which is more definitional to monstrosity: abject difference. It is in this way that we can see serial killers like Ted Bundy as ‘monsters’, or opponents in war as ‘monsters’ who must be destroyed. So it is in *Ghost of Tsushima*, which employs negative myths of dehumanisation and monstrosity to construct in contrast a positive myth of Japaneseeness.<sup>53</sup>

In *Ghost of Tsushima*, the player controls Jin Sakai, a local samurai and nephew of the island’s most revered samurai, Lord Shimura. When the Mongols invade during the game’s opening, the samurai are annihilated. What few of them remain are scattered and the island becomes occupied by the Mongols who try to consolidate their control. Over the course of the game, the player as Jin attempts to stand against the Mongol occupation and defeat them. However, Jin soon realises that adhering to the traditional samurai ways Lord Shimura instilled in him is futile against the Mongol’s dishonourable tactics. As he gradually abandons the samurai code, Jin finds increasing success in fighting the Mongols, but becomes ever more alienated from his own side. The game culminates with Jin defeating Mongol leader but being stripped of his status as samurai and exiled from his clan.

## Language and babbling: Mythologies of speech

In the game’s settings, the player can choose between English and Japanese for the spoken language and from a range of languages for subtitles. Crucially, however, the Mongols almost always speak Mongolian, no matter the player’s settings. Japanese speech is made understandable to players of any supported language, but Mongolian is not. Most of the time the Mongols’ speech is not subtitled at all. When it is—during cutscenes and certain scripted sequences—it is transliterated (not translated) in the English subtitles. In the Japanese subtitles, the speech in these instances is translated, but is surrounded by parentheses to indicate that Jin, the playable figure, does not understand it (Figure 15). On the surface, there is a simple reason for this approach: Jin does not understand Mongolian, and the game is played from his perspective.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Some of the ideas in this analysis were initially developed for an unpublished seminar paper co-authored with Joleen Blom (Ford & Blom, 2021), which is now being developed for a book chapter in an edited volume on monstrosity, due to be published in 2023. I would therefore like to acknowledge Blom’s theoretical contribution here. In this section, I start with some of the same observations that we will discuss in our chapter, but treat them differently here under the mythological framework and with a mytholudic method (neither of which are present in the co-authored chapter).

<sup>54</sup> The dynamic described in this paragraph applies whether or not the player themselves understands Mongolian—the point is that Japanese speech is homogenised, while Mongolian is not.



Figure 15. A scripted sequence showing the Mongols speech translated into Japanese, but surrounded by parentheses to indicate that Jin does not understand what they are saying.

But language is not simply a tool for communication. (That I have returned to language in some form or another in almost every game example in this dissertation should evidence that.) It is embedded in culture and the tangle of values, hierarchies and cultural capitals that come with it. An instructive example is the word ‘barbarian’, from the Greek *barbaros*. Anthony Pagden observes:

For the Hellenistic Greeks, the *barbaros* was merely a babbler, someone who could not speak Greek. But an inability to speak Greek was regarded not merely as a linguistic shortcoming ... for most Greeks, and for all their cultural beneficiaries, the ability to use language, together with the ability to form civil societies (*poleis*)—since these were the clearest indications of man's powers of reason—were also the things that distinguished man from other animals. (1986, p. 16)

It is from this linguistic inability that came the associations of the barbarian as uncivilised, uncouth, all brawn and no brains (Beller, 2007; Pagden, 1986, p. 16). Of course, the Japanese are not ancient Greeks and nor are the game's developers, but this is an instructive example of how language can be a central part of mythologisation. The ability to use a particular language (and, more granularly, particular registers, accents and dialects) is often mythologised: Latin as an especially magical or religious language; French as a romantic language. Ancient Greek, at the time, was mythologised as inseparable from civilisation. In *Ghost of Tsushima*, we might then consider the mythologies of language drawn on in the game as part of a wider mythologisation of the Japanese and Mongols.

For a more recent example, Salam Al-Mahadin (2018) examines the use of language in the Danish film *A Hijacking* (Lindholm, 2012), depicting a ship hijacked by Somali pirates. The ship's crew primarily speak Danish and sometimes English, while the pirates speak Somali. In the English-language version of the film, only the Danish speech is subtitled and

translated into English. The Somali speech is not. This imbalance is excused as realism and perspective. Like Jin, the protagonist of the film does not understand the language of the pirates. But Al-Mahadin argues that it also “empties the pirates of political valence” (2018, p. 8). She continues:

Dislocated from a locale, disconnected from a backstory, delineated within the confines of the ship, the pirates do not refer to anything but themselves; they are not signifiers of all the multiplicities and conditions of possibility that gave rise to piracy, but a monstrosity, an abjection. (2018, p. 8)

The pirates’ speech becomes “*noise instead of voice*” (2018, p. 10), guiding the viewer to see them not as humans but as braying animals. This removal of the pirates’ political context is important here. Just as the use of language in general, of particular languages, and of particular ways of using language can be mythologised, so too can a lack of language be mythologised. This is both in terms of the negative (the non-speaker does *not* have the associations and affordances that come along with the language) as well as additional associations. Consider, for example, an immigrant who does not speak the country’s language. They are excluded from the mythologisation of that language *and also* may be seen to embody certain stereotypes about immigrants as such. The use in both *A Hijacking* and *Ghost of Tsushima* of a language that most viewers or players will not understand has both of those elements, but additionally there is a gap. Because we do not understand them, we do not know what *their* language means to *them*, or what *our* language or languages mean to *them*. We are precluded from their mythical and political framework. How do they understand their situation? Is this a just war for them, for example, or ruthless opportunism? How do the Mongols view and mythologise the Japanese?

This is important when thinking about monstrosity, because the unknown and the unfathomable are often touted as aspects of the monster. Richard Kearney describes monsters as “liminal creatures of the unknown … by definition unrecognizable” (2003, p. 4). Wright argues that “what is truly monstrous is that which stands outside the processes of representation or articulation” (2013, p. 4). Of course, the unknown does not in itself constitute monstrosity, but it does help lay the foundations of it.

Besides the scripted sequences and cutscenes in which Mongolian is subtitled as either transliterated or translated text, there are also instances in which elite Mongols speak Japanese. However, what is made clear is that use of the Japanese language is not sufficient for these Mongol elites to embody Japanese values. Rather it is seen as an insidious, strategic, instrumental use. Khotun Khan, leader of the Mongol invasion, says to a subdued Lord Shimura (Jin’s uncle and adoptive father) after the opening battle on the beach:

But while you were sharpening your sword, do you know how I prepared for today? I learned. I know your language. Your traditions. Your beliefs. Which villages to tame and... which to burn. So I will ask you once again, samurai. Do you surrender? (Sucker Punch Productions, 2020a)

The Khan knows the value of understanding his foe’s mythic environment. What do they value? How do they conduct themselves? How do they think of themselves? In doing so, the

Khan understood that the samurai have mythologised combat and warfare in a particular way. It would be unthinkable for them that their enemies would do anything other than meet them head-on on the battlefield. Through the game, the Mongol's 'dishonourable' actions force the Japanese to reckon with their own mythic construction of samurai. Jin then functions as a wedge figure, prompting a clash between his approach of 'if the old ways cannot protect us, they must be abandoned', versus Lord Shimura's approach that 'if we do not hold onto our values, then it is not worth winning'.

Language and the Mongols therefore works in three main ways. One is in the noise of the hoard, prompting us to see them less as humans with their own complex political and mythical contexts and more as braying, hostile animals:

MONGOLS SPEAK INCOMPREHENSIBLY

MONGOL.SPEECH=NOISE

The second is in the gaps, where us not understanding them means that we are denied access to their mythologies:

MONGOLS SPEAK INCOMPREHENSIBLY

MONGOL.SPEECH=NOISE

[← MONGOL.CULTURE=MYSTERIOUS~DANGEROUS]

The third is in the Mongol elites' understanding that language allows one to access a culture's mythical context, allowing him to weaponise it against them:

MONGOL.ELITES LEARN JAPANESE

→ MONGOL.ELITES USE:JAPANESE TO:EXPLOIT.WEAKNESSES

Each of these motifs dehumanises the Mongols by estranging them from our mythologies of language. Rather than being a source of culture, communication and civilisation, language becomes both an obscuring cloak, jealously guarding one's cultural secrets, and an insidious infiltration, a weaponization of one's language against them.

## **Brutes, corpses and pollution: Indexical signs of Mongol brutality and Japanese harmony with nature**

At the beginning of Act 3, the final act, Jin travels to the gameworld's northernmost area, Kamiagata. This land is bleak and desolate, colder in climate but also utter ravaged by the Mongols. Forests are either burning or already chopped down. The corpses of peasants and horses litter the path. *Torii* gates, which up until this point had led to stunning areas of natural beauty inhabited by *kami*, are now aflame and crumbling. The first quest in this area is to reunite with Yuna at the Sacred Tree, which Jin finds also burned and defiled by corpses and debris. This scene is a portrayal of the Mongol's blatant disrespect for the island's nature and the spirituality infused into it through features like the *torii*. This scene is not an outlier. It holds through throughout the game that if you want to find a Mongol camp on Tsushima, you need only follow the trail of crows, corpses and rot.

Sucker Punch endeavoured to minimise nondiegetic UI features as much as possible, instead integrating indexical signals and guidance into the gameworld itself (Nelva, 2020).<sup>55</sup> This means that most things the player sees in the gameworld have particular codified, indexical meaning. *Kitsune* lead the player to Inari shrines, *torii* to Shinto shrines, and golden birds to *onsen*, Pillars of Honor, and other points of interest. These clear-cut guides create a straightforward, decentralised gameplay motif:

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JIN FOLLOWS GAMEWORLD.OBJECT~AGENT
→ JIN FINDS POINT.OF.INTEREST
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Almost anything Jin follows will lead to something, and it will do so predictably. These are not always static points of interest. The wind, for example, is always blowing in the direction of Jin's next quest objective (allowing the player to open the map less to navigate). Bumsue Chun (2021) notes a "ludo-narrative harmony" here, whereby although "Jin can also travel to ... locations that seemingly deviate from the narrative", his "identity as a masterless samurai merely following the wind justifies his haphazard traversal" (2021, p. 99).

How the slots in the decentralised motif are filled and with what is interesting. Because while the features listed just now all lead to positive points of interest, if, by contrast, the player follows arrow-littered corpses, black smoke and ruined carts, they will invariably find Mongols. All of the positive points of interest are associated with indexical signs either from nature, Japanese folklore and religion, or both, while all negative points of interest are associated with signs from Mongol defilement of those elements.

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IF      GAMEWORLD.OBJECT~AGENT=AGENT.OF.JAPANESE~NATURE
THEN   POINT.OF.INTEREST=POWER-UP~LOOT~PROGRESSION
IF      GAMEWORLD.OBJECT~AGENT=POLLUTION~DEFILEMENT~DESTRUCTION
THEN   POINT.OF.INTEREST=MONGOL.PRESENCE~CAMP
```

In most cases, Jin is personally empowered as a playable figure by following indexical signs related to Japanese folklore or nature. For example, the foxes of the island fulfil their folkloric role by leading the player to Inari shrines (Inari being a Japanese fox deity). At Inari Shrines, Jin can 'Honor' the shrine to gain progress towards either unlocking a new Charm slot of increasing the power of Charms in his inventory. After honouring the shrine, Jin may then pet the fox, which receives the affection gladly, though not conferring any additional, tangible benefit besides a warm glow in the belly. *Torii*, which in Japanese mythology mark a transition between sacred and profane space as well as, Randall Nadeau (1996, p. 109) argues, between Japanese and non-Japanese, lead to Shinto shrines, which provide new Charms. Charms are powerful equipable items that provide passive benefits to Jin. This makes real within the gameworld the mythological connection between aspects of nature or things associated with the Japanese, and power, fortune or general improvement. There truly is a connection between foxes, shrines which grant power, and Jin, whom the foxes deem fit to aid. By contrast, the player finds Mongols by following the defilement and destruction of

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<sup>55</sup> The distinction between 'nondiegetic' UI and 'diegetic' gameworld is not so clear-cut (K. Jørgensen, 2013), but this was nonetheless the developer's stated aim.

those elements. For example, in a sidequest, ‘Peace for the Divine’, Jin follows smoke to find a fox killed on a desecrated Inari shrine. A new fox appears and leads Jin to groups of nearby Mongols, skinning and tanning foxes, for revenge. Particularly in the foxes’ trusting and leading Jin, we see the sacred nature of the island quite directly favouring and aiding Jin. Likewise, as Chun highlights (2021, p. 99), the wind and Jin’s direction and desires align. The island *itself* seems to be against the Mongols.

The contrast is not between following Japanese folkloric elements and Mongolian folkloric elements, for instance, but between the real and genuine power of the island’s nature and the sacred Japanese spaces and the Mongol’s destruction and defilement of those. The Japanese mythologisation is true and powerful, but under assault. This destructive aspect to the Mongols positions them as monsters where they may otherwise be simply opposing political actors. They are portrayed as simply destroying that which is good and natural and holds real sacred power on the island. In doing so, they represent a direct threat to the categories built and maintained by the islanders’ culture, a disregard for what they hold sacred and profane and an affront to existing structures of power and reverence.

## **Mythology of noble samurai lord as contrast to the Mongols**

Contrast is vital to the brutish depiction of the Mongols. Another such contrast is formed by the mythologisation of the noble samurai lord. Here, the developers’ explicit influence from Akira Kurosawa, one of Japanese most influential filmmakers (particularly abroad), becomes important to unpack. Sucker Punch are not shy about this influence. They have given many interviews on the topic (e.g., Ehrlich, 2020) and worked directly with the Kurosawa estate to bring about the game’s ‘Kurosawa Mode’, a visual filter that applies a very carefully tuned black-and-white lens and film grain, along with audio tweaks (Romano, 2020).

Kazuma Hashimoto (2020) criticises Sucker Punch’s samurai myth as a “surface-level” engagement with Kurosawa’s samurai myth, which Kurosawa himself problematised and never himself “bought whole cloth”. Instead, Hashimoto (2020) argues, Sucker Punch lean into a more modern, nationalistic interpretation of samurai and Bushido. Rachel Hutchinson’s analysis of ‘Dynamics of Appropriation in Akira Kurosawa’ (2006) agrees with the idea that Kurosawa’s depiction of samurai both became dominant outside Japan—emphasised by the global popularity of films like *Seven Samurai* (1954)—but is also self-critical. She gives the example of *Rashomon* (Kurosawa, 1950):

A story of rape and murder told from three different perspectives, we find that the tale told from the samurai’s point of view is just as suspect as the tales told by the woman and even by the bandit, so that the samurai ethic of truth, courage and steadfastness is laid open to doubt. Even more clearly, the fight scenes between the samurai and bandit are shown in two very different ways: the first fight is noble, grand and choreographed, while the second is scrappy, cowardly and more ‘realistic’. The second fight shatters the image of the first, and with it is shattered the samurai ethic. (2006, p. 176)

Kurosawa is aware of his samurai myth as a myth, exposing it even as he creates it.

*Ghost of Tsushima*, in contrast, critiques the samurai myth only from a strategic perspective. As we see from the very beginning with the confrontation between Shimura and Khotun Khan, having strong values and a strict understanding of how one should conduct oneself is depicted not as necessarily flawed, problematic or ignoble in itself, but an exploitable weakness. The game questions whether, when this is exploited, it is worth holding onto those values even knowing it means defeat, but the goodness of those values *in themselves* is not really questioned. Hashimoto argues that the game “lacks a script that can see the samurai as Japanese society’s violent landlords. Instead of examining the samurai’s role, *Ghost of Tsushima* lionizes their existence as the true protectors of feudal Japan” (2020). Many of the game’s sidequests and activities like liberating villages from Mongol occupation have Jin, beloved samurai lord, singlehandedly defeating the Mongol oppressors to grateful adulation from the freed peasantry. Indeed, as Jin rides around Tsushima, it is difficult to find anyone who does not love and adore their feudal landlord. The only exception is the town of Yari-kawa, inhabited by the survivors of a failed rebellion against the samurai order. However, Jin wins their adulation too once he rescues them from a Mongol siege.

This is not to say that peasants occupied by brutal invaders would not be glad of liberation. Rather, the framing of the game means that the only role we see Jin in is as a one-man-army, beloved liberator of the people, and not as a feudal landlord, a role in which the samurai were integral in putting down peasant uprisings, particularly in the later Tokugawa era (Ikegami, 1995, p. 166). Motifs like SAMURAI LIBERATES VILLAGE FROM:MONGOLS are repeated throughout the game, while SAMURAI SUPPRESSES PEASANT.UPRISING is a motif in the game-world’s past, which Jin atones for during the game anyway. Because the Mongols take over the role of dominators of the land in their invasion, the samurai can be depicted as liberators, nostalgically seen as benevolent patriarchs rather than oppressive landlords. The samurai can now play the insurgent, underdog uprising, rather than their peasant subjects.

This mythology of the noble samurai lord contrasts with the brutish, underhanded Mongol both on an individual level but also in this notion of the ‘one-man-army versus the horde’. The samurai are individualised as heroes, and most of the Japanese who fight in the game are samurai: distinctly characterised, powerful individual fighters. The Mongols, by contrast, often appear as a mindless, babbling horde. Though not depicted as (un)dead, in this way they do share some of the mythology of the zombie. Backe and Aarseth argues of zombies that “as a group of (literally) voiceless, mentally and physically sub-human Others, it is hard not to read them as a stand-in or euphemism for threatening but too human Others, whether unwanted class or ethnic group or merely political unsavories” (2013, p. 2). The Mongol hordes—excepting the Mongol elites—in the game share much of this description: mostly voiceless, strategically inferior (when infiltrating a camp by stealth, for example, they follow predictable paths, can be easily distracted and seem not to notice much that goes on around them, such as comrades dying), and physically inferior (a single samurai seems to be worth at least ten Mongols in combat). Mongols and zombies seem to share in this way a number of mythic partials. Due to their sheer numbers—and by the sinister strategic intelligence of the Mongol elites—they become a threat as a horde.

Individually too the Mongols are in many ways opposite to the samurai. Weaponry, for example, marks a stark dividing line. The katana is, unsurprisingly, emblematic of the samurai in *Ghost of Tsushima*. Stephen Turnbull, one of the historical consultants on *Ghost of Tsushima*, writes in a book on the katana that “no edged weapon in history has been more closely associated with its owner than the Japanese sword has been with the samurai. To a samurai, one’s katana was both a weapon and a symbol” (2010a, p. 4). A finely crafted weapon with individual personality (2010a, p. 7), it also served as a badge of rank (2010a, p. 26), as unmistakably metonymical of the position of samurai as a crown is of a monarch. WIELDS.KATANA is about the most indexical partial of SAMURAI, comparable to Frog’s example of ONE-EYED as an emblematic partial of ODIN in Scandinavia (2021a, p. 174). Accordingly, Mongol fighters never wield a katana, instead using a variety of curved swords, spears, pole-arms, maces, shields and bows. Often, they are depicted as being large and brutish, both as fighters and in terms of their weaponry. For example, many of the Mongol elites tower over Jin and wield massive two-handed curved swords. This perhaps demonstrates a monstrous excess, contrasting the refined restraint of the elegant katana, relying on technique and poise rather than brute strength and massive weaponry.

This is also exemplified in the Mongol’s use of gunpowder weaponry. A class of Mongol warriors appropriately called ‘Brutes’ (countered explicitly by the Moon stance) tend to wield either heavy, bludgeoning weapons or guns. Later in the game, the Mongols employ the Goryeo<sup>56</sup> *hwacha*. An artillery-like weapon, it fired one to two hundred rocket-propelled, flaming arrows. Notably, the *hwacha* had not been invented by 1274 when *Ghost of Tsushima* is set. Their historical consultant, Turnbull, would have been able to tell them that: Turnbull notes that in the 1274 invasion the Mongols did use gunpowder and bombs, but no mention of *hwacha* (2010b, p. 27). Nonetheless, explosives such as these would have “produced a further level of terror among the Japanese”, according to Turnbull (2010b, p. 27). So, the *hwacha* seems to be included as an intensifier of this terror. Although he reluctantly acquiesces to Jin’s use of the enemy *hwacha* in the quest ‘A Message in Fire’, Shimura stresses that it is “a weapon of the enemy... Not samurai!” (Sucker Punch Productions, 2020a). The *hwacha* is a dishonourable weapon, fired from afar and requiring little skill or training, with little ability to discriminate on the battlefield.<sup>57</sup> As a Goryeo weapon, it also serves as an implicit threat to the Japanese: you will be defeated and your technology and weaponry absorbed and assimilated into the Mongol army, used to fuel further expansion. As well as that, it underlines that the Mongols are flexible and adaptable in contrast to the rigid and exploitable samurai. The Mongols use anything that will give them an advantage. In contrast to the Japanese, this

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<sup>56</sup> A Korean kingdom that united the peninsula, ruling until 1392.

<sup>57</sup> As hinted throughout this section, the samurai prefer individual, personalised fighting, perceived to be more honourable. For example, Turnbull notes that “the preferred Japanese method [of archery] was to deliver a single arrow against a chosen and, hopefully, worthy target whose death would earn the warrior considerable individual glory” (2010b, p. 25). In hand-to-hand combat, the samurai preferred “individual combats between worthy opponents ... these worthy opponents sought out each other by issuing a verbal challenge that involved shouting one’s name as a war cry” (2010b, pp. 25–26). The *hwacha* is therefore antithetical to this approach, being far out of verbal challenge range, operated potentially by not very worthy fighters, and not able to discriminate on the battlefield.

gives them an amorphous, boundary-blurring quality. They represent no fixed society or culture with fixed boundaries, but an engine of conquest and domination.

## More than political enemies? Colluding with *oni*

The base singleplayer game contains few fantastical elements. There are some, like the equipment and abilities found as part of the game's 'Mythical Tales' sidequests, but for our purposes here, the Mongols are not portrayed as explicitly *supernatural* invaders. Just brutal and resourceful. In this way, the Mongols have been aligned with Cole's impure conception of evil. The Mongols are not evil because they are fundamentally evil, but rather they commit evil acts as a by-product of the more rational, material, political goal of conquering Tsushima and then Japan.

This dynamic changes in *Ghost of Tsushima: Legends* (Sucker Punch Productions, 2020b), a cooperative, player-versus-enemy expansion released a few months after the base game. *Legends* allows players to choose one of four classes (samurai, hunter, ronin or assassin) to partake in one of three gamemodes: Story, Survival or, as of patch 2.04 added in September 2021, Rivals. Story mode has up to four players attempt to hold off increasingly powerful waves of enemies. Rivals splits four players into two pairs who compete to survive a challenging gauntlet or beat it faster than the other team. *Legends* adds many fantastical elements. Most pertinently for this section, *oni*, who in this game are powerful humanoid demons who fight alongside Mongols against the playable figures (who, although not Jin, are still marked as being from Tsushima).

The word *oni* has no straightforward English equivalent. It is usually translated as 'demon', but this can also be misleading or reductive (Reider, 2010, p. 1). Else, as here in *Legends*, the original term is directly transferred into the English version, a foreignizing translation strategy which works to place the reader in an explicitly foreign context (Venuti, 1995, p. 20). It would therefore be reductive to, for example, simply transfer the construction of demons in *Doom* from that earlier section here. *Oni* is also not a particularly unified term in its native context. Noriko T. Reider examines "the four major lines from which oni stories have evolved: the Japanese, Chinese, Buddhist, and *onmyōdo*", noting that "there are many overlapping elements across the four lines; some descriptions are contradictory and yet believed simultaneously" (2010, p. 2). Nevertheless, though exceptions exist, *oni* are typically evil or malevolent beings in Japanese folklore:

The popularity and longevity of the oni myth is no doubt partially based on the beings' conventional demonic accoutrements, which have remained relatively constant through the ages: they are dreadful supernatural beings emerging from the abyss of Buddhist hell to terrify wicked mortals; their grotesque and savage demeanor and form instill instant fear; and the oni's omnipresence in the socio-historical and cultural archive of Japan is directly attributable to the moral, social, and religious edification that stories about oni engender. (Reider, 2010, p. 1)

Foster notes also the particular nature of *oni* as being otherworldly. He uses the example of the *hyakkiyagō*, the ‘night procession of one hundred *oni*’:

When the *hyakkiyagō* was on the move, it was to be avoided: suddenly the familiar space of the city was possessed by wild, unpredictable, dangerous demons. For a short time, *this* world and the *other* world would intersect and the usual rules of human culture were invalid. (2015, p. 15)

Even if *oni* differ from demons in important respects, there are two important overlaps. One is the connection with evil, malevolence and danger. The other is that they come from another world in some sense. In terms of the construction of monstrosity in *Ghost of Tsushima*, this is significant because it introduces a new type of monster to the game. In the base game Mongols are an invading force who commit evil acts in pursuit of that overall goal, and to reflect that are depicted as monstrous within the frame of the game from the perspective of the population of Tsushima. The *oni* in *Legends* are rather monsters of pure evil and, while humanoid, are from a fundamentally *other* world intersecting with ours, rather than from another country separated by the ocean.

What is also interesting here is that the *oni* fight *alongside* the Mongols in *Legends*. They are not a third faction bent on destroying all, like demons of pure evil *à la* *Doom*. They find *allies* in the Mongols. A diagrammatic relationship is created: MONGOL/ONI=ALLY/ALLY. This either means that the *oni* share the political, earthly goal of conquering Japan, which seems unlikely, or that this portrayal shifts the Mongols towards a pure conception of evil. In other words, the Mongols do not commit evil acts because they are deemed necessary to their overall goal of conquering the island, rather they are fundamentally evil and *therefore* want to conquer the island.

```
MONGOL.AIM=CONQUER:JAPAN
→ MONGOLS INVADE TSUSHIMA
→ MONGOLS COMMIT EVIL.ACTS
```

Versus:

```
MONGOLS=EVIL
→ MONGOLS INVADE TSUSHIMA
```

By contrast, this then also implies a purer goodness on the part of the Japanese. Rather than political opponents, the Japanese now represent the bastion of good against the forces of evil. The alliance between the Mongols and *oni* literalises what was already implicit in the ‘impure’ Mongols versus ‘pure’ Japanese dichotomy—the Japanese having an affinity with nature, the Mongols desecrating nature, and so on. It also frames Tsushima as ‘the world’ proper, with the otherworld from which the *oni* came being aligned with the Mongol’s homeland: TSUSHIMA/MONGOL.EMPIRE=WORLD/OTHERWORLD, where OTHERWORLD is aligned with MALEVOLENCE. The Mongols are not just invaders from another country, but demons from another world.

There is an important caveat here, however. *Legends* is kept quite distinct from the main game. It can even be purchased separately. Milestones in the singleplayer campaign can

unlock certain cosmetic items in *Legends*, but otherwise there is no mention of, reference to, or transfer of anything from *Legends* to the singleplayer mode. The mythologisation outlined here is therefore also not as strongly connected to the game as a whole—particularly if one ignores *Legends* and plays only the singleplayer campaign.

We could see this through the lens of ‘canon’ in popular culture, where *Legends* is deemed ‘not canon’. Canon in this sense pertains to determining what is ‘true’ and what is not in a fictional world (Brooker, 2012). It attempts to create a single, cohesive narrative world, where any contradictions are ironed out by decisions on what is and is not ‘canon’.<sup>58</sup> Following Blom (2020, p. 101), I find this a flawed concept, a promise to reduce complexity that only exacerbates it. The question of whether or not *Legends* is a part of the *Ghost of Tsushima* world’s ‘truth’ is not answerable in my view, but nonetheless I do acknowledge a separation between *Legends* and the base game. However, what *Legends* perhaps shows is a more extreme and literal version of the monstrofication that is *already* happening in the base game. After all, there is a reason why Sucker Punch felt it natural and unproblematic to link the Mongols with *oni*, providing very little exposition.

## Discussion

*Ghost of Tsushima* presents a dichotomy between the ‘pure’ Japanese inhabitants—honourable, mostly virtuous, in tune with nature—and the ‘impure’ Mongol invaders—callous, cruel, defiling nature: JAPANESE/MONGOLS=PURE/IMPURE. Jin is a wedge figure who must reconcile the samurai values that lie at the core of the society’s mythic landscape with the fact that holding onto those values will likely mean defeat. This wedge arises due to the military might of the Mongol invaders, yes, but also due to the clash of cultures and values. What makes the Mongols monstrous in *Ghost of Tsushima* is not particularly their own culture—which we get glimpses of via the cultural artefacts left in their camps—but also their opportunistic weaponisation of Japanese mythology against them. They learn and understand the Japanese mythic landscape but disrespect it, instrumentally turning it against them. They take a mythologised, lush, verdant landscape and plunder its resources on an industrial scale. They study the samurai approach to battle and exploit its weaknesses. They learn the Japanese language not to engage with their culture or foster communication, but as a tool for military intelligence. A mythology of Japaneness, of Tsushima is constructed and valorised before being assaulted and defiled by the Mongol invaders.

Crucially, the construction of Japaneness—forged particularly through the myth of the noble samurai lord—is linked to the natural order of the island itself. By using specifically Japanese mythologisations of nature—fox gods, nature spirits, and so on—and showing that, (a) these mythologisations are *true* (by climbing to an Inari Shrine, the player actually

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<sup>58</sup> For example, *Ghost of Tsushima* features two endings based on whether you choose to kill or spare Lord Shimura at the end. There is a great deal of online discussion about which of these two endings is ‘canon’, warning that Sucker Punch will have to ‘decide’ when they release a sequel (in canonisation in popular culture, the author tends to be the ultimate authority) (e.g., Alwani, 2020; Geiger, 2021; Valenzuela, 2021). There is even lively discussion on which of the horses the player can select for Jin is ‘canon’!

receives a magical charm; by following the game's 'Mythic Tales', the player is actually bestowed with corresponding magical powers), and (b) that the benefits of these gods, nature spirits and so on are only available to the Japanese and in particular to Jin, the Mongols' desecration and exploitation of this mythology is that much more heinous and evil. It is worse than a simply industrial use of the island's resources. Like language, the Mongols treat the island's nature as resource, as tool, a disenchanting approach that appears to strip it of its mythical quality, and this apparent lack of regard for mythicity makes them monstrous. Monsters, as I have argued, lie on the borders of society and expose the fragility of those borders. The Mongols do this in their invasion. The specific mode of their invasion challenges the very core of Tsushima's mythologies, and these challenges are played out in the dilemmas faced by Jin. In this way, the mythologisation of Tsushima as a place of serene nature and the Japanese inhabitants as the natural, harmonious occupants is used to other the Mongols and make them monstrous due to their violation of this 'harmonious, natural' order.

And because Jin is the playable figure, these dilemmas become the player's. It is notable that much of the game is framed as a choice between the samurai way and the dishonourable way. For example, when attempting to destroy a Mongol camp, the player may either walk up to the front gate and use the 'Standoff' mechanic, honourably challenging the inhabitants up-front to a series of one-versus-one duels, or they may sneak into the camp and slaughter the Mongols by stealth. By affording both of these options with an array of gameplay options, specific mechanics like standoffs, and equipment geared towards one or the other, the game asks the player to make this decision of how far to uphold the mythologised samurai values and how far to abandon them in order to defeat the Mongols. In either case, the samurai values are positioned as superior. The need for Jin to eschew them is a purely strategic one. The game neglects to enter into a wider problematisation or critique of the samurai mythology.

## 6.8 The Witcher

Andrzej Sapkowski's *Witcher* universe (Polish: *Wiedźmin*) has enjoyed a great deal of success since its first incarnation in 1986. After finding an audience in Polish, the first game was released (CD Projekt Red, 2007), the book series translated into English, two more acclaimed games released (CD Projekt Red, 2011, 2015a), and a big-budget Netflix series (Schmidt Hissrich, 2019–2022) produced. Although the series began as short stories and novels, here I focus on the games. Although the novels are hardly obscure, the games have somewhat eclipsed them in popularity, particularly outside of Poland. Scholars on Polish culture have gone further, with Tomasz Z. Majkowski claiming that the third game “has become the most successful product of contemporary Polish popular culture” (2018, p. 2). Sapkowski’s universe is perhaps best known for its monsters, drawn and adapted from many folklores—not least of all Polish and Slavic—from the Striga to the Djinn to the Kikimora to the Leshy. Here I consider how the *Witcher* games construct their mythologies of monstrosity.

Most publications of the *Witcher* universe, including the games, follow Geralt of Rivia. Geralt is one of a few, dwindling witches, humans taken as children and subjected to ruthless mental and physical training, mysterious rituals, and chemicals. As a result, witches have supreme, supernatural abilities, including night vision, resistance to disease, fast healing, a very long lifespan with a prolonged youth, an affinity for basic magic, immense strength, and very fast reactions. These abilities come along with sterility, excessive libido, and a subdued capacity for emotion.

The *Witcher* universe is one defined by a clash of worlds. This is seen particularly in the mixture of Norse, Greek, Slavic, Celtic and other folklores that I alluded to, but also in the cosmogenic event of the fictional world, the Conjunction of the Spheres, which Radu Aurelian Panait observes is “one of the very few examples of worldly content devoid of folkloric background” (2021, p. 82). In brief, the *Witcher* universe is actually a multiverse consisting of many planes of reality. Before the Conjunction, most species (monsters as well as elves, humans, etc.) lived on their own plane, separate from the others. Only in very special circumstances could individuals traverse between these. However, 1,500 years prior to the events of the first game, according to an in-game glossary entry, these spheres collided, destroying many worlds and planes and “trapping in our dimension many unnatural creatures, including ghouls, graveirs and vampires” (CD Projekt Red, 2007). In this way, the game reflects in its cosmogenesis the clash of cultural and folkloric traditions itself.

### **Witchers as monstrous monster hunters**

A recurring theme in the *Witcher* universe is the dual status of witches as both hunters of monsters and themselves monstrous. In the player’s Glossary in the first game, it is noted that “people need witches, but are simultaneously afraid of them”, and that witches are “invariably attacked during pogroms and social upheavals directed against those who deal in magic” (CD Projekt Red, 2007). This is a tension that runs throughout the series: the very mutations and magic which make the witches capable of defeating the world’s most dangerous monsters also makes them monstrous outcasts. The player, as Geralt, is rarely

welcomed anywhere. In the very early *Witcher 3* quest ‘Lilac and Gooseberries’, Geralt and Vesemir walk into a tavern. “Wha? Witchers...?” says one patron, a soldier. “I’ll not drink with weevil-arsed freaks”, says his friend (CD Projekt Red, 2015a).

Why are the witches considered monstrous? A part of the construction of witches as monstrous monster hunters is the *artificial monster* type. There is a ‘science gone too far’ element to witches, seen in how they are created—for they are *created*, not *born*, and that is important. After the Conjunction of the Spheres, humans had to learn to live in a world with monsters (discursiveised as such from the off), a constant threat to the populace. Early human kings tasked mages (magic was also something introduced with the Conjunction) with dealing with the foes. After a time, the mages succeeded in creating through magic, genetics and alchemical mutation powerful warrior-mages: witches. Witches’ magical powers were a little stunted, however, and so were seen as a failure by their mage creators and banished. The banished witches, along with a handful of renegade mage allies, set up the first Order of Witches in Castle Morgraig.

Recall this decentralised formulation of the *artificial monster*:

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KNOWLEDGEABLE.AGENT (K.A) PUSHES BOUNDARIES OF:KNOWLEDGE
→ K.A CREATES MONSTER
→ K.A LOSES CONTROL OF:MONSTER

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In the *Witcher* universe, this is centralised as such:

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MAGES PUSH BOUNDARIES OF:KNOWLEDGE
→ MAGES CREATE WITCHERS
→ MAGES BANISH WITCHERS
→ WITCHERS ESCAPE
→ WITCHERS ORGANISE

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In *The Witcher*, we follow the *artificial monster* structure, but add some aspects to it. The creators of the monster banish their own creation, rather than the monster escaping entirely on its own volition. Perhaps more importantly is what we might see as a political element. Rather than just one lone creation escaping to potentially terrorise the land, we have a number of them who not only organise themselves into their own society but bring others with them. This brings the witches into more human structures. The created ‘monster’ is in part a rival *polity* as well as a more physical, visceral danger, perhaps further blurring boundaries between monster and human.

The creation of witches is therefore marked by experimentation, pushing at the boundaries of knowledge, but also tension and otherness. Witches were created out of fear and then came to be feared themselves. This fear of witches strengthened towards the end of the Second Era of Witches, arguably because they had been *too* successful and efficient in exterminating monsters. With little fear of the monsters that the witches had protected the people from, people no longer suppressed their latent fear of the witches themselves.

In this way, witches as monstrous monster hunters become something unnatural in the world, a product of experimentation. Crucially, as part of the *artificial monster*, they are created at the very bounds of knowledge by a tiny subset of extremely specialised people—

mages. (The motif of scientists as a learned elite isolated from ordinary people seems to be filled here in the mage class.) As a result, witchers are seen as unnatural, barely understood creations, created by a group of people already not well-trusted within the gameworld. A journal entry in *The Witcher 2* concludes:

From the dawn of time, history remembers mages either as pure-intentioned and courageous heroes or as rogues bereft of reverence and faith. Human memory tends to remember the latter for longer, which may be why common folk mostly hold people of this profession in contempt. (CD Projekt Red, 2011)

And the glossary in the first games notes that “simple folk fail to differentiate between witches, sorcerers and witchers. Anyone who wields magic is regarded as suspicious and godless” (CD Projekt Red, 2007). Witchers are therefore the dangerous, untrustworthy, scarcely understood, powerful, yet at times necessary creations of untrustworthy mages.

## Monsters of Slavic folklore and the Polish Romantic mode

Many of the universe’s monsters are drawn from Slavic folklore. However, many other folkloric traditions are drawn from too, such as ancient Greek, Norse and Celtic. As Sławomir Gawroński and Kinga Bajorek (2020, p. 7) point out, there is much debate over the Slavic character more generally of the series, with Sapkowski also distancing himself from the label. In spite of that debate, the series is notable for bringing the creatures of Slavic folklore to prominence where before only a few—such as the Baba Yaga—had widespread international recognition, in line with Majkowski’s (2018, p. 2) argument that *The Witcher 3* is contemporary Polish culture’s most successful output. *The Witcher 3* is often singled out here among the games too, with Joshua Stevens claiming it is “arguably the most ‘Slavic’” when compared to its predecessors, and that “this folkloristic dimension of the game has also consistently been singled out for praise and can be seen as driving much of the game’s commercial and critical success” (2020, p. 539).

I may seem here that I use ‘Slavic’ and ‘Polish’ interchangeably. Of course, the terms are not interchangeable. However, with regards to folklore specifically, the current national borders of Slavic countries are, for the most part, quite young, and do not necessarily align with cultural, ethnic or linguistic groups. Folklore has developed in the region for much longer than particular borders have been in place and is therefore tied rather to the Slavic people (an ethno-linguistic group) than to particular modern nationalities, although of course there is plenty of regional variation as in any folkloric tradition.<sup>59</sup> In some instances, it makes a great deal of sense to talk about the *Polishness* of *The Witcher*, and this is largely the subject

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<sup>59</sup> Pivotal folklorist Alan Dundes defines the ‘folk’ in ‘folklore’ as “*any group of people whatsoever* who share at least one common factor”, so long as that group has “some traditions which it calls its own” (1980, pp. 6–7). So while there is, according to Dundes’ definition, Polish folklore (as well as folklores as granular as a specific workplace’s folklore), folklore will also transcend, predate and postdate national borders where there are relevant similarities between people, such as an ethno-linguistic group like Slavs.

of Majkowski's (2018) paper. Majkowski explores the complex way in which Polish culture weaves Slavic identity with Polish national identity, embedded within it but also exceptional, "a proper ruler over Slavic cultures" (2018, p. 29). This is part of Poland's awkward position as seeing itself as a not-fully-Eastern country, but also not-fully-Western one (2018, p. 28). *The Witcher 3*, Majkowski argues, "exploits the idea of Slavic culture while distancing itself from it" (2018, p. 29). Here, therefore, I do not use 'Slavic' and 'Polish' interchangeably, but intentionally.

Paweł Zaborowski (2015) explores Slavic folklore in Sapkowski's universe. He caveats this by noting that due to a lack of historical sources, a unified and complete Slavic mythology either does not exist or cannot be spoken of with any certainty, but argues that we can at least see glimpses and parts (2015, p. 23). Zaborowski (2015, p. 29) concludes that the Slavic influences of *The Witcher* are in particular comprised of Slavic demonology. According to Zaborowski (2015, p. 23), only one Slavic god is used, Živa, and even she appears in the game more as an amalgamation, called Dana Méadbh (a Celtic-inspired name), drawing also from other agrarian gods such as the Irish Danu and the Roman Diana. Other motifs in Slavic folklore and mythology do find their way in: the importance of fire in Novigrad, for instance and a number of the rituals portrayed in the game (2015, p. 27). But it is through demonology that Slavic influences mostly find their way into the game, through the games' monsters. These influences did not always manifest fully intact. Zaborowski (2015, p. 29) notes that when presenting these Slavic monsters, Sapkowski used prototypes from folklore, but altered, embellished and mixed them into a fragmentary re-narration. In the case of some figures, like the striga, this is instead a total re-narration (2015, p. 29).

Crucially for Zaborowski (2015, p. 29), these reformulated monsters can be described as an adiaphorization, the elimination of metaphysical, supernatural or spiritual qualities in favour of purely aesthetic or function presentation. Perhaps as a result of our increasingly secular, desacralized culture, Zaborowski (2015, p. 30) argues that these qualities must be transformed and reduced to the dimension of physical existence and supernatural properties—excluded from the metaphysical and spiritual sphere and marked with magic. The appearance and behaviours of folkloric monsters is drawn from, but their relation to the sacred, the metaphysical and religion is eschewed. Majkowski agrees, stating that "the local folklore is closely tied to beasts, daemons and gods—but lacks references to actual cultural practices, beliefs or customs" (2019, p. 2).

This fits with the bestiary as a means of computational containment (Švelch, 2018). Slavic folklore is plundered from for interesting new additions to a compendium—ready-made solutions and figures to diversify the creation of a fictional world, Zaborowski (2015, p. 31) argues. In so doing, its monsters become reduced in-game to only that which *can be* captured in a compendium. That is, the bestiary becomes not only a lacking description of an entity with a metaphysical existence, but a full definition of it. This is supported by the Conjunction of the Spheres as the framing narrative for the series. It turns many monsters into *monsters from without* using the two-worlds justification. Monsters in *The Witcher* don't have a fuller metaphysical existence because they don't need one. Unlike in the Slavic folklore they are drawn from, many monsters in *The Witcher* come from a separate plane of existence and can therefore be unproblematically banished or eliminated. In terms of mythic discourse, the

integers of Slavic mythology are used but are put into entirely different relations than in the original context.

Majkowski also notes that “the world of Slavic monsters and deities is a destroyed one, shattered and fragmented, to be reclaimed and rebuilt”, linking to “the larger Polono-Slavic myth originating from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and tying Polish identity to pagan ‘Slavdom,’ violently destroyed by Germianic [sic] Catholicism and Russian Orthodoxy” (2019, p. 2). This notion of a folklore shattered and fragmented finds a rather direct parallel in *The Witcher* in the Conjunction. We might therefore read the series’ skin-deep deployment of Polono-Slavic folklore more in this vein of Polish national mythmaking.

Many alongside Majkowski have noted the series’ lean into the aesthetics, forms and motifs of Polish Romanticism (Drewniak, 2020; Kubiński, 2015; Schreiber, 2017; Werner, 2018). Polish Romanticism is usually considered to span from 1822 with the publication of Adam Mickiewicz’s first poems until the culmination of the movement’s ideals in the January Insurrection against the Russian rulers in 1863 (Coghen, 2016). The insurrection was ultimately unsuccessful and led in 1864 to more oppressive Russian control than before. Many of Polish Romanticism’s artists and writers, especially during the latter half of that period, were working in exile, imagining and prophesising a once again free and whole homeland (Coghen, 2016). Polish Romanticism is in part a nostalgia for a mythological pre-Latinate Slavdom, though complicated by the potential for ‘Slaviphilia’ to be associated with a connection to imperial Russia (Janion, 2014, p. 19). Maria Janion famously describes this as “the uncanny Slavdom of Poland” (2014, p. 21),<sup>60</sup> leading to Poland’s awkward position as “to the west from the East and to the east from the West” (2014, p. 13). A “society, once proud of its 800-year-and-counting traditions, had been decimated by three partitions and the disappearance of Poland from world maps” (Sobolewski, 2018). In this context, Polish Romanticism is in part a way of constructing Polishness and a sense of shared nationhood for a people without a nation in a way that differentiates itself from Poland’s imperial neighbours on all sides.

*The Witcher 3* includes direct references to Polish Romanticism. As Majkowski observes, “common folk [in Velen] still celebrate the Forefathers Eve—a ritual taken straight from Adam Mickiewicz’s romantic play, with direct quotations” (2018, p. 19). Majkowski also notes the Polish Romantic mode in the game’s geopolitics through the contrasts and conflicts between the games’ various empires and factions. Velen, he argues, is coded as Polish:

Velen, the area visually similar to Central Europe, is therefore trapped between two regimes. Unable to express any political form of its own, it has to choose between the Western version of enlightened modernity based on cultural superiority and ‘civilizing’ attempts on the part of the conqueror, and the homemade parody thereof. On the surface, they seem similar—but the local version is just a tyrannical autocracy without any redeeming qualities of more civilized conquerors: there is no rule of the law or respect for individual life within the Redanian empire, only naked violence. (2018, p. 13)

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<sup>60</sup> Janion’s most well-known work foregrounds this phrase, titled *Niesamowita Słowiańska szczyzna* (2006), *The Uncanny Slavdom*.

These would-be colonisers Majkowski aligns with those Poland faced in Europe: “Poland was colonized by three countries representing two cultures: German, identified as Western, and Russian, perceived by Poles as Eastern, and therefore barbaric—superior in strength only” (2018, p. 14). Velen, like Poland, is then seen as the bridge between two empires, West and East, ravaged in the crossfire. It is no surprise then that Velen is a focal point for many of the games’ more explicit Polono-Slavic folklore homages. But Majkowski remarks that it is not a flattering depiction of Slavic folkness:

Despite all their vibrancy and attractiveness, most Slavic references described above are either pathetic or horrifying. Common people of White Orchard, Velen and Novigrad are a curious bunch: clueless about the monsters preying on them; often cruel, ignorant, superstitious, and alcoholic. The only ruler with folk roots, the self-proclaimed Bloody Baron, is an inept, deluded drunkard and a wifebeater. The pellar is, in turn, wise, but also quirky and oblivious to the results of a ritual he performs: Geralt has to defend the population from the ghosts he conjures. The Velen peasants tend to be sneaky, xenophobic, and untrustworthy, always ready to cheat on the witcher, or to murder inconvenient people. They secretly worship the Crones, the most hideous creatures imaginable, and frequently put themselves in trouble out of stupidity or greed. Such a portrait is hardly flattering to the community, and it is no wonder that Geralt looks down on all those Slavic types, preferring the company of people with distinctly non-Slavic names. (2018, pp. 19–20)

In this vein, Wiktor Werner (2018, p. 148) describes Geralt in particular as “a romantic protagonist for his maladjustment to the world, an impossible need of love, a sense of humor unacceptable by people, and, finally, a uniqueness described here as mutation”, although with a more modern heroic twist.

Majkowski contrasts the figure of the Bloody Baron with Olgierd von Everec, introduced in the *Hearts of Stone* expansion (CD Projekt Red, 2015b). The comparison demonstrates the “ambivalent depiction of folk culture” (2018, p. 21) in the game whereby Polish folk traditions are seen both nostalgically and with contempt. Majkowski argues that this ambivalence along with the outsider figure of Geralt “perpetuates an elitist aspect of Polish culture: the idea that Slavs should be governed by an elevated, Western-educated elite, without whom they are lost” (2018, p. 22). Slavic beliefs are “an alternative to colonization and modernization, and a tool to oppose tyranny” but, at the same time, “the native ways are ineffective, as the common folk cannot produce proper leaders” (2018, pp. 21–22).

More broadly, the amalgamation, adaptation and combination of monsters from different folklores also follows this Polish Romantic mode. If we take the notion that Polish Romanticism at least in part functions “as a bridge between Slavdom and Western culture” to “strengthen the colonial idea of Poland being the proper ruler over Slavs” (Majkowski, 2018, p. 1), then it makes sense that *The Witcher* would take ready-made integers from Slavic demonology (Zaborowski, 2015, p. 31) and integrate them into less specific, more general, and at times more Western mythic motifs and themes. By also removing the metaphysical and

spiritual aspect of Slavic monsters (Zaborowski, 2015, p. 30), they can more easily slot into a wider array of motifs.

## Monstrous-feminine

Many analyses of the monsters of *The Witcher* argue that their depictions often contribute towards the mythologisation of the feminine as monstrous: the monstrous-feminine. The concept largely comes about with Barbara Creed's foundational work *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993). Through Kristeva's (1982) notion of the abject, Creed links the modern depiction of horror film monsters to a primordial human conceptualisation of the "woman-as-monster" (1993, p. 1). "All human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject", she argues (1993, p. 1). Of course, the monstrous-feminine then has many faces, but Creed argues that there are two dominant modes that can be identified, which make up the two parts of her book. The first is that "when woman is represented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive functions" and the second is "of woman as castrator ... linked more directly to questions of sexual desire than to the area of reproduction" (1993, p. 7). Within these modes, Creed identifies a number of different myths (and she uses the term 'myth'), such as "the myth of the *vagina dentata*" (1993, p. 2).

These are too numerous to treat fully within *The Witcher*, but fortunately scholars in game studies have already begun that work—Stang (2016, 2018a, 2021) in particular. Sapkowski's world and CD Projekt Red's rendering of it draws greatly on Slavic folklore but not exclusively, as discussed. Majkowski notes that "the so-called 'Slavic aesthetics' turns out to be a conglomerate of various mythological motifs, from Greek to Norse" (2018, p. 7), referring to the Scandinavian- and Celtic-inspired Skellige Isles, the Mediterranean-inspired Toussaint from the *Blood and Wine* expansion (CD Projekt Red, 2016), and monsters from those various traditions, such as the siren. However, one thread that runs through the depiction of a great many of these monsters, Stang argues, is the monstrous-feminine.

Stang gives the example of the three Crones, who feature prominently in the *Witcher 3* main quest 'Ladies of the Wood'. The Crones, Stang observes, "are clear adaptations of the three Fates ... ancient Greek goddesses—Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos—who spin, weave, and cut the threads of fate for both gods and mortals" (2021, p. 182).<sup>61</sup> She continues: "Like all powerful goddess figures, the Fates are terrible and frightening in their power but also important figures for worship and supplication" (2021, p. 182). The Crones are both figures

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<sup>61</sup> I would contest identifying them as being of specifically *Greek* inspiration. Many Indo-European folkloric traditions feature a set of three fate-weaving women, such as the Norse Norns, the Irish Morríghna, the Latvian goddesses Laima, Kārta and Dēkla, and the Slavic Baba Yaga, who sometimes appears as a trio of sisters sharing the name. M. L. West (2007, p. 380) suggests that such trios of fate goddesses likely originate from a common Indo-European ancestor culture. The in-game bestiary entry for the Crones also begins with a quote from an unsubtly misspelled "Macbeth" quoting a slightly altered version of the opening lines of Act 1, Scene 3 of the real *Macbeth*. The Crones appear to be more an amalgamation of many such trios rather than a direct adaption of one. Stang does acknowledge these other influences (2021, pp. 183–184), but I am not convinced of the primacy of Greek influence. However, Stang's point does not rely on the Crones being Greek-inspired, and so this is only a clarification and not a challenge to the argument.

of fear and worship. An in-game book acquired during the quest reads: “The gods have abandoned us. ... Only the Ladies of the Wood watch over Velen. In foul times, when plague or famine steals our harvest, we must bed the Ladies for help” (*The Ladies of the Wood*, 2021). The Crones appear in two forms. First as beautiful, young, naked women (Figure 16), and later in their true forms as giant, monstrous, deformed, elderly women (Figure 17).



Figure 16. The Crones depicted in their young, beautiful forms on a tapestry made of human hair.

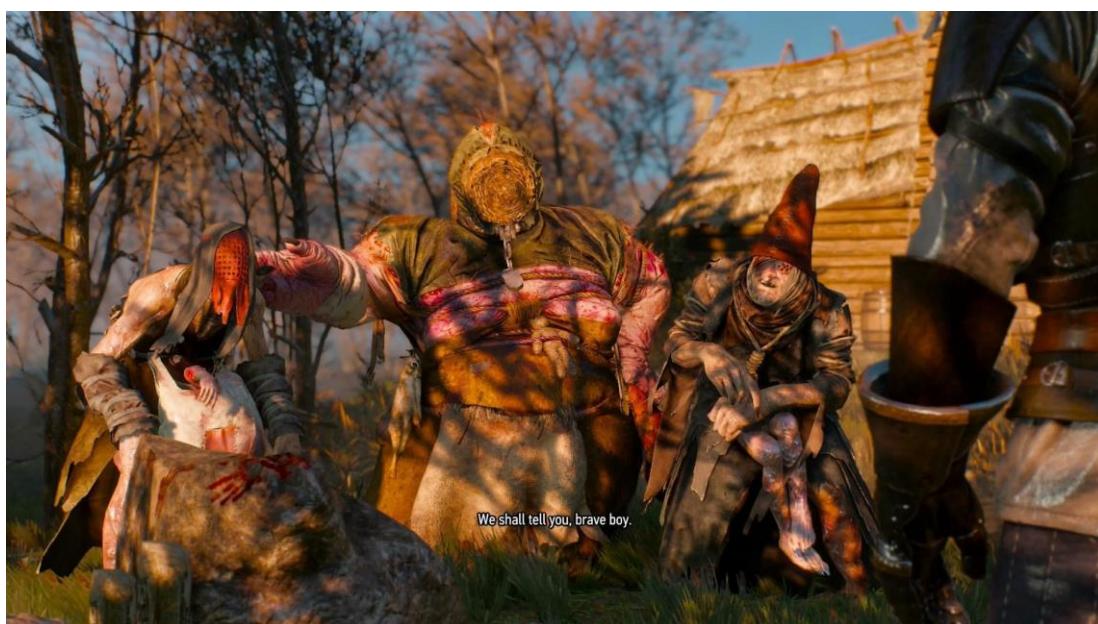


Figure 17. The Crones in their true forms.

Stang analyses a scene in which the Crones, as young women, are shown making a soup out of the body parts of a sacrifice given to them in exchange for help. This is, of course, horrifying and monstrous behaviour, “but also highly suggestive, with close-ups of their nipples and one woman licking the bloody soup off another’s fingertip” (Stang, 2021, pp. 188–

189). Scenes such as these form the familiar construction of attractive female bodies and sexuality being used as deception for underlying monstrosity.

The quest ends by fighting the Crones. While their visual depiction is monstrous enough, Stang also observes that the way the Crones are animated during the fight also aligns them with the conventions of monstrosity within the game as a system: “their movements and attack patterns are identical to other monsters in the game”, using the same animation rigs as water hags, gargoyles and foglets, respectively (2021, p. 189). Stang links the depiction of the Crones—as well as many of the games’ other monsters, in varying ways—to Creed’s monstrous mother and woman-as-castrator. In the figure of the hag or crone, Stang argues, the “categories of Maiden, Mother, and Crone overlap, and so the hag/crone is made monstrous in relation to her aged and non-normative appearance but also because of her sexual desire and monstrous maternity” (2021, p. 200).

Suffice it to say that we could extend this type of analysis to many of the monsters of *The Witcher*. Stang’s work is excellent in that regard. The point for my purposes here is to show that the games don’t only employ a single of these monstrous-feminine constructions, but rather draw on the mythology of the monstrous-feminine itself, suffused through the games’ monster design. This is found in the games’ direct adaptations of figures such as the siren, but is also brought forward in emulated mythmaking in the original creations (or at least amalgamations) like the Crones. In the siren, we have a fairly straightforward manifestation of Creed’s myth of *vagina dentata*:

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FEMININE.FIGURE SEDUCES MAN WITH:SEXUALISED.FORM~MAGIC
→ FEMININE.FIGURE TURNS INTO:MONSTER
→ MONSTER KILLS~CASTRATES MAN

SIREN SEDUCES SAILOR WITH:SEXUALISED.FORM&SONG
→ SIREN TURNS INTO:MONSTER
→ MONSTER KILLS SAILOR
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The Crones too have many of these kernels. They appear first as sexualised women in the tapestry and are flirtatious with Geralt:

<b>Crone</b>	Good looking and clever, too. Where’ve you been hiding, boy?
<b>Geralt</b>	So you’re the three Crones?
<b>Crone</b>	Crones? Where d’you get such an ugly word, young man?
<b>Crone</b>	Village bitches have been gossiping again.
<b>Crone</b>	There’s no limit to how jealous and petty humans can be. Do we look like crones to you?
<b>Crone</b>	Go ahead, check. Touch me, White-Haired One. Where it pleases you most.
<b>Geralt</b>	[Touching tapestry] Is it my imagination, or is this tapestry made of hair?
<b>Crone</b>	Ooh, he’s got a sensitive touch.
<b>Crone</b>	Touch me more, boy, touch me more.

(CD Projekt Red, 2015a)

Besides the language itself, the voices the Crones speak in are also many different overlayed voices, casting doubt on their true voice and therefore true identity.

As we have seen, this beautiful depiction *is* revealed to be an illusion. However, the Crones remain flirtatious in their true, grotesque forms:

- |                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| <b>Geralt</b>     | You looked different in the tapestry.                          |
| <b>Whisperess</b> | We're all dressed up just for you.                             |
| <b>Brewess</b>    | If you only knew how much time we spent in front of the glass. |
| <b>Weavess</b>    | Do you desire us?  |
| <b>Geralt</b>     | I'm impressed. Polymorphism—a rare talent.                     |
| <b>Brewess</b>    | Oh. I'd suck every last drop out of you!                       |
| <b>Weavess</b>    | Ah, to be woven together with you.                             |
| <b>Whisperess</b> | I'd be you're [sic] best – and last.                           |
| <b>Geralt</b>     | Hm, not what I came for.                                       |

(CD Projekt Red, 2015a)

While no doubt using its integers, here the example of the Crones seems to diverge from the *vagina dentata* notion in two key ways. The first is that the Crone's seduction continues after the illusion has been dispelled. When Geralt acquiesces to the flirtatious request to be touched when in tapestry form, this does not bear any negative consequences for Geralt. Quite the opposite, it seems to engender the Crones to him, and they subsequently make a deal. When the Crones appear in their true form, they continue the seduction and imply a much greater threat—"I'd be you're [sic] best—and last". Nonetheless, Geralt successfully completes the deal, gets the information regarding Ciri out of the Crones, and leaves without bloodshed. Their purpose is clearly not *only* to seduce and kill. They are shown to have broader political aims too. This perhaps aligns the Crones more with figures like the Baba Yaga, who "decides on a case-by-case basis whether she will help or kill the people who come to her hut" (Zipes, 2013, p. viii).

The second key difference is in the fact that they embody what we might call the *three fate goddesses* schema. The combination of the *three fate goddesses* with *vagina dentata* is very unusual. Goddesses might be more readily linked to Creed's other type of the monstrous-feminine, the maternal monster. *Three fate goddesses* are typically very distant and not very sexual. The Greek Moirai, for instance, even amongst the famously libidinous Greek gods, do not seem to be associated with sexuality. E. M. Berens tells us that "the Moiræ are represented by the poets as stern, inexorable female divinities, aged, hideous, and also lame" (1880/2016, p. 132). Zeus is said to have *feared* the Moirai (Rosich, 2018, p. 40)—not his typical approach to women, shall we say. Similarly, the Norns seem to have been seen as distant, uncaring and roundly resented (Bek-Pederson, 2011, pp. 30–33). There appears to be only one reference to the Norse Norns as sexual or seductive, and even this is a tentative interpretation: Karen Bek-Pederson observes that the unusual "combination of *norna dómr* (judgement of the *nornir*, i.e. 'death') with the verb *njóta* (to have use for, to benefit from, to enjoy; Frtz, s.v.)" could suggest that "it is quite possible to understand *Hveðrungs mær* (Óðinn's maid) as an alluring otherworldly woman who is inviting the king to her abode", if

one accepts “that *Hveðrungs mær* and the *norn* are the same in this stanza” (2011, p. 19). So, while it is possible, it does not seem particularly common. And their sexualisation does not seem to be the enduring image of the *three fate goddesses* today. In *Assassin’s Creed Valhalla*, for example, the Norns are hooded and veiled, mysterious and distant women.

To the extent that tripartite goddesses are sexualised, it is more likely to be one of the three. For example, in a MOTHER/MAIDEN/CRONE<sup>62</sup> triad, the maiden would alone be sexualised. It is therefore unusual almost no matter how one slices it that *The Witcher 3* amalgamates the *three fate goddesses* with *vagina dentata*. The amalgamation perhaps works because both constructions ultimately function by fearing unknowable women. The fates are mysterious and distant figures whose machinations we never truly understand, but whose weaving we tend to feel most strongly through the cruel deaths of loved and admired ones. Fate is not *always* bad, of course, but its close link to death makes it the object of fear and uncertainty. *Vagina dentata* serves essentially as a cautionary tale to mistrust women, who may use their powers of seduction to deceive men. In this way, it is similarly associated with the sense that these women cannot truly be understood and that they also bring danger and death.

Geralt’s prowess is displayed in the fact that he thwarts both aspects of this. With lines such as, “I’m impressed. Polymorphism—a rare talent”, Geralt tells the Crones that he sees through their deception and *understands* their nature. With his refusal of the Crones’ offer of sex—“hm, not what I came for”—Geralt also proves impervious to seduction. We know from the rest of the game (prior to that point, after it, and in the *Witcher* universe more widely) that Geralt is a highly sexual being, so his refusal here demonstrates a more conscious restraint. Yes, it is more humorous in this specific context because the Crones are in their ‘hideous’ true forms, but even in their polymorphed form Geralt also seemed able to keep himself out of danger, touching the tapestry only because he knew no harm could come of it. This links the triple goddess motif to the monstrous-feminine, suggesting even female divinity is suspect and deceptive, but also that Geralt has contained this monstrosity too.

This somewhat extended example is of course only a small part of *The Witcher*. What it does, however, is demonstrate the series’ amalgamative mode. It attempts to produce a mythology that feels both fresh and familiar by taking storied integers and motifs from a range of folkloric traditions and shifting around the connections between them. The *monstrous-feminine* appears to be one of the dominant modes of monstrosity in the game, hence in this case folkloric motifs are reconfigured to fit with that.

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<sup>62</sup> Mother, maiden, crone usually refers to a *triple moon goddess* schema, most famously popularised by Robert Graves and taken up strongly in neopagan and New Age thought (Jones, 2005). This leads it to be a common motif used in popular culture, such as The Three in Neil Gaiman’s comic series *The Sandman* (1991). In the widespread construction, three goddesses represent the waxing, full and waning phases of the moon (Graves, 1955/1990, p. 49). Despite suggestions that the *triple moon goddess* schema is therefore a chiefly modern invention, Prudence Jones (2005) finds significant evidence of its having had genuine purchase since antiquity. The *triple moon goddesses* are associated with a number of other triads: GODDESS<sup>1</sup>/GODDESS<sup>2</sup>/GODDESS<sup>3</sup> =MOTHER/MAIDEN/CRONE, WAXING/FULL/WANING, SPRING/SUMMER/AUTUMN, HEAVENS/EARTH/UNDERWORLD, FATE/FATE/FATE.

## The Conjunction of the Spheres as a cosmogenic/apocalyptic context for monstrosity

I have mentioned *The Witcher*'s part-cosmogenic event, part-apocalypse Conjunction of the Spheres before, but it warrants individual treatment as well. Primarily, I have argued that it serves as a convenient diegetic explanation for the mix of monsters of folklore, from ekimmaras to sirens, werewolves to drowners. As an event in itself, it is interesting because, as Panait observes, the Conjunction is "devoid of folkloric background" (2021, p. 82). One should always be wary of sweeping, definite statements such as this, particularly with a topic as broad as folklore. It is true that there appear to be—to my knowledge—no major folkloric traditions that have a very similar event as part of their cosmogenesis or apocalypse. However, I would not say that the idea comes from nowhere. Besides modern science fiction and fantasy works that employ multiverses—for example, Michael Moorcock's *Swords Trilogy* (1971) features an event called the Conjunction of the Million Spheres—we can find parallels in other traditions. With Yggdrasil in Norse mythology, for example, we have a kind of multiverse whereby different kinds of creatures inhabit separate 'worlds' under its roots (Simek, 1993/2007, p. 375). The clash of gods, people and monsters in Ragnarök with the shaking of Yggdrasil does not seem too disparate to the Conjunction. In a broader definition of folklore, we also find a 'conjunction of spheres' as a medieval explanation for things like the introduction of the Black Death (Chechotko, 2021, p. 44; de Chauliac, 1363/2007, p. 249). And we might relate the Conjunction to various 'portal to Hell' constructions (although the Conjunction also introduces good or neutral elements as well as monsters). Nonetheless, it is fair to say that the Conjunction does not reference established folkloric traditions as directly as many of the series' other aspects do.

The Conjunction quite straightforwardly allows for a two-world conception of the *monster from without*:

MONSTER ENTERS OUR WORLD  
→ MONSTER IS SLAIN~BANISHED~ASSIMILATED

In *The Witcher*, it manifests as such:

SPHERES CONJOIN  
→ HUMANS AND MONSTERS AND MAGIC ENTER WORLD  
→ HUMANS SLAY~BANISH MONSTERS

There are some notable parts of *The Witcher*'s instantiation of the two-world *monster from without*. The first is that monsters and humans enter the world *at the same time*. Humans were also from a different plane of existence. Dwarves, gnomes and Aen Seidhe elves all precede humans on the Continent. This point is primarily mentioned in glossary entries, for example, and not especially stressed during normal gameplay. That is to say that the perspective of the game is very much one of human dominion. Humans are the dominant species in the world and have been for a long time by the beginning of the games. Personhood in *The Witcher* universe is extended primarily to humans, but also to elves, gnomes and dwarves. Most other creatures—particularly hostile ones—are discursivised as monsters. These

are separated into categories in the bestiary: beasts, cursed ones, draconids, elementa, hybrids, insectoids, necrophages, ogroids, relicts, specters and vampires. Some of these monsters, such as bears, predate the Conjunction and are thus native to the Continent, unlike humans. This does not prevent their inclusion in the bestiary, however. In this way, rather than being the primary grounding for their ontology, the Conjunction seems to function more as the reason for their all being together in the same place. That is, pre- and post-Conjunction monsters are monsters all the same.

Much more attention is paid to how particular monsters come into being. This is typically the basis for each bestiary category, and usually provides a clue for Geralt as to how to defeat them. Cursed ones, for example, are often humans who have been cursed into monstrosity. Botchlings are “born of dead, unwanted babies discarded without a proper burial” which attack pregnant women (CD Projekt Red, 2015a). Correspondingly, the curse is lifted if they can be pacified and given a proper burial near the family, transforming them into a friendly lubberkin.<sup>63</sup> Wraiths are the furious spirits of the departed, and to defeat them one must find the wraith’s original body and destroy it ritually (CD Projekt Red, 2007). Often, the way to defeat a monster is more straightforwardly gamic (especially, unsurprisingly, in the games compared with the novels). Elementa are creatures fuelled by magic, and so an anti-magic Dimeritium Bomb thrown at a gargoyle will be highly effective, for instance. Geralt’s toolbelt of magical signs can each be used to counter various properties of monsters. The Yrden sign, for instance, can be used to trap ethereal beings like wraiths, rendering them corporeal and allowing Geralt’s sword to damage them.

GERALT ENCOUNTERS MONSTER

GERALT LEARNS ABOUT:MONSTER [ENTRY IN:BESTIARY]

→ GERALT EXPLOITS MONSTER.WEAKNESS

→ GERALT SLAYS MONSTER

In this world where many different types of monstrosity coexist in large part due to the Conjunction, the encyclopedic mode becomes even more pronounced. Knowledge is the ultimate power in *The Witcher*, where each foe has one or two key weaknesses that Geralt is invariably able to exploit through use of signs, potions, weaponry and tactics. This becomes a language that the player can learn over the course of the game. One will quickly discover that Yrden is effective against ethereal beings of all kinds. The Black Blood potion turns a witcher’s blood into poison, which is useful against vampiric monsters like ekimmara. This encyclopedic mode is in this way even more closely associated with the computational monstrosity of *Dungeons & Dragons*. ‘Monster’ for Geralt is not a discursive but a technical term, referring to ontological distinctions. For example, the efficacy of using a silver sword marks out monsters as being a fundamentally different kind of entity. He does not hunt humans unless cursed or possessed; there are clear categorical distinctions that are empirically supported, not only a discursive label. This is also interesting because it undermines the moral component of monstrosity. If a monster is simply a different kind of being, then they may

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<sup>63</sup> Botchling and lubberkin are *poroniec* and *klobuk* in Polish respectively, drawing directly from the Slavic demon *poroniec* and the friendly spirit it can be transformed into, a *klobuk*.

not be *evil* but simply different, just as a bear is not *evil* if it mauls an unfortunate hiker or hunts some salmon. Geralt is not making *moral* judgements about the beings he hunts, and indeed in many cases his curiosity and approach allow him to help the monster find salvation or peace, often justifying or at least explaining their wrath. The Conjunction supports this curiosity-angled encyclopedic containment because it introduces new and unknown creatures who are of a different nature. Geralt must learn about them to defeat them and does so without the prejudice that may follow a true hero of a community, banishing that which threatens its categories, but more as animal control, dealing with creatures which unwittingly threaten society just by being, and removing them if necessary.

## Discussion

The world of *The Witcher* is defined by monstrosity. After all, that is the *raison d'être* of the eponymous profession: to slay monsters. Partly due to the Conjunction as a quasi-cosmogenic/apocalyptic event, all different monster types laid out at the beginning of this chapter coexist in the gameworld. Almost all monsters are *monsters from without* with the two-world (well, many-world) basis of the Conjunction. These mingle with monsters more deeply entwined with the nature of the Continent, predating the Conjunction: *monsters of nature*. Both of these are fought by witchers, who are monstrous in themselves as *artificial monsters* of a kind (who at times fight other *artificial monsters* such as magically animated golems). The monsters infest a land plagued also by people who commit monstrous acts, *monsters from within* such as the Bloody Baron or Gaunter O'Dimm. Monstrosity in *The Witcher* can just as readily come from an ordinary person's dark heart or political machinations as it can a twisted beast from another plane of existence.

The centrality of monstrosity is embodied in the ambiguity of witchers themselves. If we take the final motif of the encyclopedic mode I laid out in the previous section—GERALT SLAYS MONSTER—we might initially assume this is a relatively straightforward instantiation of HERO SLAYS MONSTER. To some extent it is. The third game culminates with Geralt's defeat of the undoubtedly evil and monstrous Wild Hunt, for example. However, Geralt primarily fights the Wild Hunt in self-defence and to defend Ciri, rather than *because* they are monsters. The hunt for the Wild Hunt is not a monster hunter's monster hunt. And, as the example given earlier near the beginning of the third game shows, it is difficult to forget that Geralt too is considered monstrous and often reviled. To the extent that he goes out of his way to help ordinary people, it is typically for pay or some other personal gain such as information rather than altruism. Geralt is depicted as fundamentally other, ontologically, as well as uncaring, unsympathetic, self-centred, manipulative and blunt. The focus on witcher as a *profession* rather than, say, a heroic calling is telling in this regard. Witchers are generally seen not as altruistic, celebrated heroes, but as a necessary evil. Monsters who can be paid to kill other monsters. This leaves us with the motif MONSTER SLAYS MONSTER.

In this sense, the *Witcher* universe is depicted as almost fundamentally unheroic. Anna Michalska (2020) describes Geralt as neither hero nor anti-hero but a “no-hero”, highlighting “his refusal to be idealised and the reduction of morals to professional responsibility. As a no-hero, the witcher rejects the abject ideas and in a way downgrades himself from a

hero/villain to a collected middle-man” (2020, pp. 28–29). Dawid Matuszek (2017, p. 137) observes that “early on, Geralt realizes that this is not a world designed for heroes, nor for knights-errant and protectors of damsels in distress”, the latter two models in particular parodied in the expansion *Blood and Wine*. It is a rather pessimistic take for a fantasy world. Agnieszka Dzięcioł-Pędich and Marcin Pędich (2017) describe Geralt as an Other with no promise of “return from the abyss to normality”, a professional who often has to “choose between evils” and who frequently “denies the tropes of fantasy and the cycle of the hero’s journey” (2017, p. 52). Situating *The Witcher* within Polish fantasy literature more widely, Dzięcioł-Pędich and Pędich note that “as in many fantasy stories, otherness is connected to the protagonists’ power, but in these stories they are also the Other to their own communities” (2017, p. 59). Though their focus is on the novels, this construction is repeated in the games, I would argue.

Though not a scholarly work, Rowan Kaiser (2016) makes the interesting observation that the game *is* heroic, but Geralt is not the hero, Ciri is. Kaiser’s situating of this within the Hero’s Journey is unconvincing, but the notion that Ciri is more rightly a hero than Geralt is a useful consideration. Ciri has the Elder Blood, making her a *preordained hero*. As the journal entry in *The Witcher 3* concludes, “only she possessed the power to stop the White Frost—the near mythical force which threatened not just our world, but countless others as well” (CD Projekt Red, 2015a). Geralt plays instead the role of father and guardian—a dynamic explored by a number of scholars (e.g., B. J. M. Horn, 2021; Lucat, 2017)—*facilitating* Ciri’s heroic role. With this reading in mind, it is then very telling that the games’ playable figure (particularly in the third game) is *not* the hero. (Geralt is the primary playable figure; notably, the player *does* control Ciri in a limited number of scenes, increasing in frequency over the course of the main questline.) Instead, the player plays as the ambiguous monster/monster-hunter/father/guardian/professional Geralt. This perspective decentres heroism from the structure of the game. Heroism is somewhat marginalised. Even though it wins out in the end, the semantic centre of the game is its monsters, the hunting of monsters, and the ambiguity of being a monstrous figure. This is reinforced by the prominence of encyclopedic containment as the mode by which Geralt and the player discover, learn about, strategize against and slay the *Witcher* universe’s monsters. It is more a game about cataloguing monsters and performing the job of monster-hunter than it is about heroism.

## 6.9 Conclusion: Monstrosity, mythology and games

As with heroism, we now zoom out, not to make sweeping generalisations about monstrosity as such, but reflections on what arises from a mytholudic analysis through the lens of monstrosity in five examples. How does mytholudics help us understand *monstrosity* in these games? Each of these games could also have focused on the heroism in them. Indeed, the two have significant overlap—*The Witcher* is a prime example of that with Geralt. But by focusing on monstrosity, I turn my analysis to particular questions regarding the mythologisation of the other, the abject, of that which we want to cast out of society.

The monster-types laid out at the beginning help with this comparative function. Interestingly, they arose in quite a different way than the hero-types; I return to this point in the following chapter. The monster always escapes and always returns (J. J. Cohen, 1996, pp. 4–6) because the cultural anxieties and category crises it represents do not go away, but shift and morph as society changes. Because of this, some relatively stable monster-types can be established representing often longstanding traditions of monsters in a similar vein. The types I lay out are the *monster from within*, the *monster from without*, the *artificial monster* and the *monster of nature*. These types are formed in oppositional pairs where a given monster can land somewhere on the spectrum of both pairs. As such, we can visualise them as a spectrum with two axes:

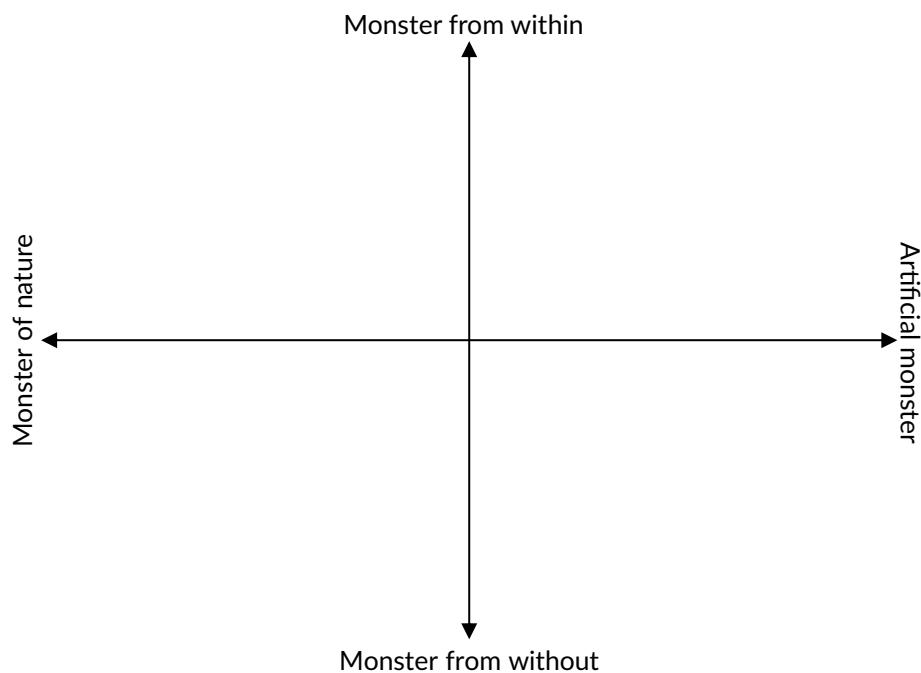


Figure 18. Visualisation of the opposite pairs of monster-types.

Like the hero-types, these monster-types represent some of the most prominent ways of thinking about where monstrosity comes from. Does monstrosity come from within an

entity, or from without? Is monstrosity a product of nature or of artifice? This is a spectrum and not a binary because these categories can quickly become mixed, as I have discussed throughout the chapter. Demonic possession, for example, would be understood as a *monster from without*, and yet it may have a corrupting influence, making it difficult to tell at what point the monstrosity is coming from within. Likewise, it can be hard to draw a sharp distinction between natural and artificial, especially if we consider the animation of organic material or mixes of the two. As such, these types are useful insofar as they help us think about *where monstrosity is said to come from* in the game, because this helps us to understand what precisely is being mythologised and how.

With that in mind, a brief recap. The *monster from within* positions monstrosity as an internal feature of an individual. This positioning can be done in a variety of modalities. Religious perspectives may see an individual as morally evil to the extent that they are considered a monster. A pathologizing approach is also common today, where agents are described as in some way psychologically twisted or broken, and as a result of that are monstrous. It is also important that the monstrous agent in question is of a kind that is not normally monstrous. Primarily, the *monster from within* is about casting an evil agent out of a group by individualising their evil as a fundamental but internal *difference*, construed in these cases as monstrosity. By contrast, the *monster from without* begins with an othered or outcast agent whose incursion into a group is seen as a threat. This can be the attempted re-entry of a *monster from within*, who having been cast out from the group is now a *monster from without* with reference to that group. Or, it can be some kind of two-world configuration, where the monster is seen as emerging from a fundamentally different plane of existence or world, such as the common gate to Hell image. Often, this kind of monstrosity defines and strengthens the bond within a group by positing an external entity that threatens it. The *artificial monster* and the *monster of nature* contrast in how the monster is said to come to be. The *artificial monster* involves the creation of a monster by an agent. Typically, this involves some kind of knowledgeable figure pushing the boundaries of knowledge and, intentionally or not, creating a monster. *Frankenstein* is the most well-known example of this. Another example would be Saruman's creation of the Uruk-hai in *The Lord of the Rings*. Typically, these kinds of monsters reveal anxieties surrounding the potentially terrifying and uncontrollable power of human creation. By contrast, the *monster of nature* reflects the potentially terrifying and uncontrollable power of nature. They are monsters who arise naturally in some way, though usually this is nature in *excess*.

Between all types of monsters, when it comes to games Švelch (2018) introduces another pairing to consider: contained versus sublime monstrosity. Švelch (2013) argues that, due to their computational nature, games tend towards the contained. However, he does explore some of the avenues for sublimity in game monsters too. He draws on Vella's (2015b) notion of the *ludic sublime* whereby, in Švelch's interpretation, "there can be a temporary sublime which precedes any potential full, encyclopedic knowledge of a system" (2018, p. 10). He also concludes by saying that we might "still be able to envision other monsters that are unknowable or at least highly unpredictable" such as through artificial intelligence or procedural generation (2018, p. 10), the former of which he explores in a case study of *Alien: Isolation* (Creative Assembly, 2014; Švelch, 2020). A distinction can also be made between the

computational aspects of the monster that can be catalogued and known versus that which operates more on the level of affect via the representational and the semiotic. That is, I may be able to look up a monster and learn all there is to know about its behaviour and its stats and so on, but I may *still* be disturbed or experience other affects when confronted with the monster in-game in real-time. With this sublime-contained distinction we can visualise another axis of monstrosity:

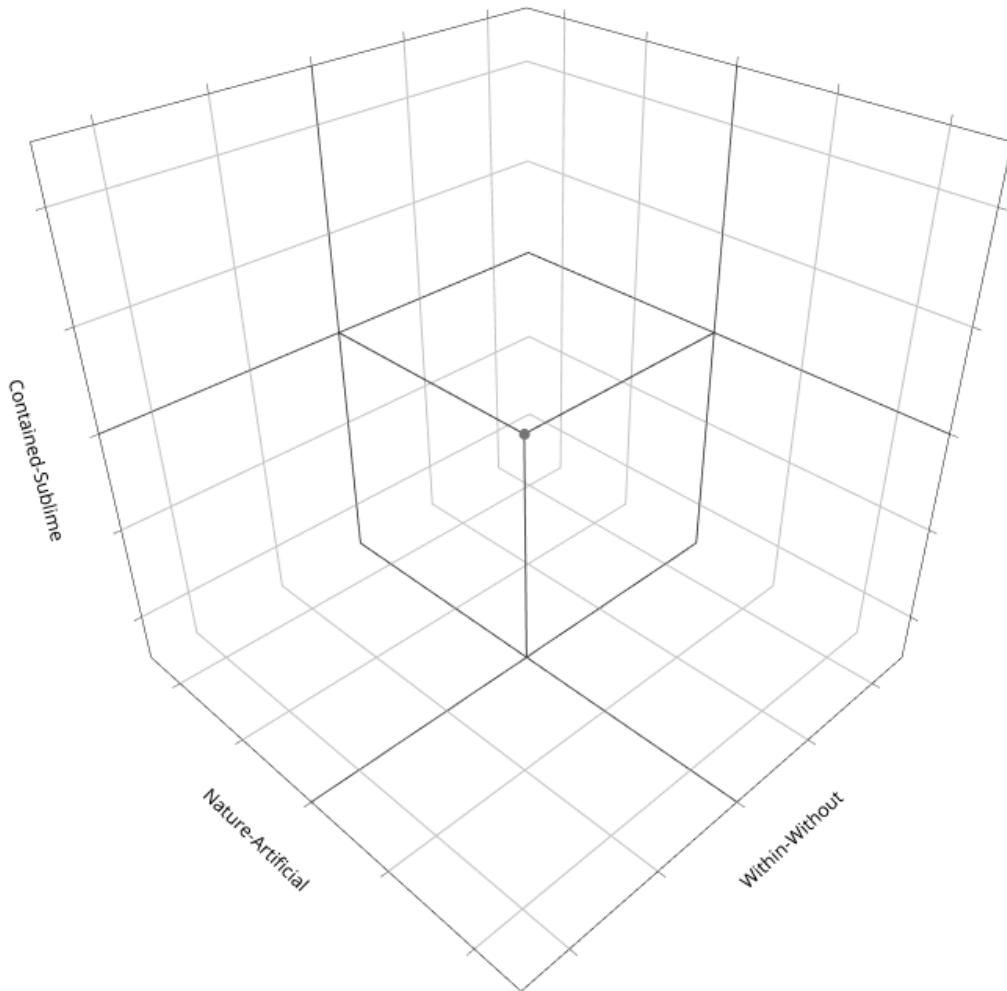


Figure 19. Visualisation of the monster-types with an additional contained–sublime axis.

However, for simplicity and clarity it might be best to omit this axis in visualisation. As a visualisation though, this helps to show that each of the three pairs forms a continuous spectrum, and that the three axes are not mutually exclusive of each other. As I will examine more closely in the following chapter, this is not the case with the hero-types. With these distinctions in mind, I examined five examples in this chapter: *Doom*, the *Pokémon* series, *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, *Ghost of Tsushima* and *The Witcher* series.

*Doom* was chosen to present what would intuitively seem like a very straightforward depiction. Largely intended to be a no-nonsense, straight-up shooter, one would not expect complex, self-reflective themes to be interrogated over the course of the game. I described the mythological lens earlier as the analysis of the obvious, and *Doom* is where that aspect

should shine. What is interesting about *Doom* is precisely that there was almost no thought put into any of its representational elements. There are three key components to this: Doomguy as the playable figure, demons as the monsters, and Mars as the setting, Doomguy? The name tells you that he is really meant to be nothing more than a playable figure. Demons on Mars? A “cool hook”, in Romero’s words (Pinchbeck, 2013, p. 21). Analysing *Doom* in this way then seems like overkill, reading too much into it. But the point of mytholudics in the case of *Doom* is to understand why *these* elements are what Romero and the team arrived at when trying to put up a cool, unobtrusive, unself-reflective setting and not *other* elements. I conclude that the mythology of demons has crystallised in popular culture into being a pure manifestation of evil. This, combined with the two-worlds formulation of the gate to Hell, means that they are a monsters who can be entirely unproblematically slaughtered. There is no opportunity for rehabilitation or integration of the monster because they are pure evil. There is no need to reflect on societal boundaries or norms that are threatened, because they are being threatened from an entity from an entirely different world. Their construction as monsters through the mythology of demons means that there is no possibility or need to understand them or to reflect on ourselves. This is then supported by the setting, Mars. Using the mythologisation of a sterile, barren Mars, we have an arena which is entirely separated from society and which can be unproblematically damaged. Finally, Doomguy draws on the mythology of special forces soldiers and of the *hero-victim*. Ensuring then that he has nothing left to lose and is separated from society on Mars, we have the perfect, uncomplicated killing machine.

*Pokémon* provides a more ambiguous example. Despite originally having ‘monsters’ in the name, it is difficult to think of *Pokémon* as monsters. This is for a number of reasons. One is that far from being cast out or feared, the series revolves around building cooperative, loving partnerships between trainer and *Pokémon*. Another is the series’ Japanese development context, in which ‘monster’ is a loanword and Japanese translations such as *oni* or *yōkai* carry different traditions and connotations. Another is the series’ transnational, cross-cultural market. One of the largest franchises on the planet, *Pokémon* draws from and is adapted to different markets all over the world. With such breadth, it can be hard to unpick what cultural anxieties any potential monstrosity might be responding to. As a border case in this way, with *Pokémon* I explored the boundaries and grey areas around the term ‘monster’, as well as seeing what interpretations could be drawn out of *Pokémon* through a lens of monstrosity.

*Senua’s Sacrifice* is the first example to in some sense wear its mythology on its sleeve. Depicting the fantastical journal of a Pictish warrior into the Norse Helheim, the game outwardly draws on two folkloric traditions. But, I argue, the use of these folklores is framed instead around a conflict between two competing mythologies of mental illness. Within the game, some see Senua’s hallucinations as the Darkness, an evil entity that must be exorcised, while some see them as the Sight, a gift that allows Senua to see the world in powerful new ways. While never referred to as such in the gameworld, Senua’s condition is described in the game’s marketing and paratexts as psychosis. This frames our playing of the game, as we see the Darkness and the Sight as competing mythologies of psychosis—the former rendering psychosis as inner demons, the other as a superpower. However, what is interesting is

that in offering two competing or contradictory mythologies within the same organising structure, the game exposes both as mythologies. Because we are forced to reflect on the contradiction between these two viewpoints, and because the game ends with a synthesis of the two, both mythologies are unnaturalised and shown to be contingent. With these two contradictory mythologies forming the orbital centre of the game, other mythological elements—such as those drawn from Norse or Pictish folklore—primarily function to support one or the other of those core mythologies.

*Ghost of Tsushima* is quite similar in this regard. The playable figure, Jin, figures as the synthesis between opposing forces—the Mongol invaders and the samurai defenders—prompting a questioning of the samurai mythology. However, behind the game’s outward critique of the samurai myth lies a deeper mythologisation. Throughout the game, the samurai are almost universally loved by their feudal subjects. The nature of the island itself is shown to be aligned with the samurai, and in particular with Jin. Jin’s problematisation of the samurai myth is instead a strategic one. It does not question whether the samurai are mythologised as good and pure, rather whether it is worth compromising on those ideals to beat the Mongol invaders. By contrast to this, the Mongols are made monstrous. They wantonly destroy the serene landscape, their camps indexed by rotting corpses and fire. They use insidious, underhanded tactics and weaponry. And they are shown to defile the sacred spaces of the island—sacred spaces which actually do function magically within the gameworld. By invading the samurai, they are shown to be *against nature* and therefore monstrous.

*The Witcher* offers ambiguity above all else in its monstrous constructions. Or, rather, abundance. Almost everyone and everything thing in *The Witcher* universe is in some way monstrous. Crucially, monstrous for different reasons. The series involves all forms of monstrosity, within and without, natural and artificial. This is embodied in the playable figure, the witcher Geralt. Geralt is himself considered monstrous while being a professional monster-hunter, who hunts every kind of monster. The semantic centre of the games is their monsters, not their heroes. Navigating the world of *The Witcher* is primarily one of encyclopedic containment. Each new region means new monsters, and each new monster has specific fighting methods and equipment to counter it which Geralt can learn and document in his bestiary. The games are fundamentally about confronting new forms of monstrosity, learning about them and defeating them systematically.

Let’s return to the visualisation from earlier, now populated by monsters from the game examples:

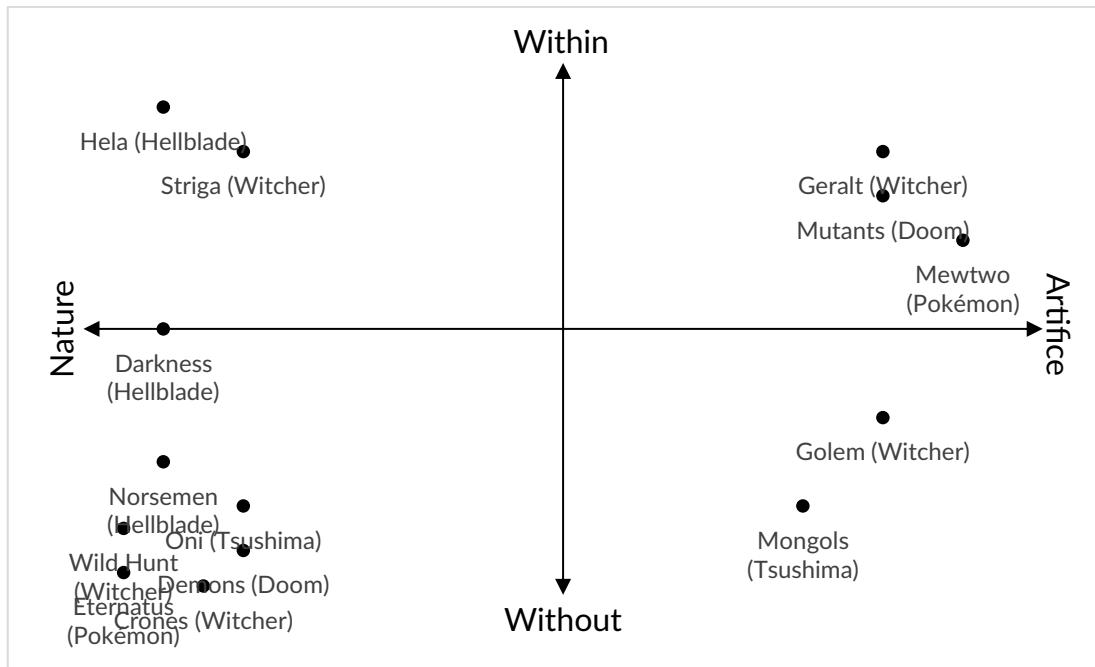


Figure 20. The two-axis representation of monster-types populated by examples from the games analysed.

There is plenty to quibble with here regarding the specific placement of monsters—that is beside the point. Seen together, these examples show some of the diversity of monstrosity in games and monstrosity in general. Monstrosity comes from many different places. We also see that examples group towards the extremes of one axis or both. Of course, sample size, sample bias and my own bias prevent any strong claims being derived from this. Rather than data being interpreted, this is illustrates the argument that excess is central to monstrosity.

This also shows that no example is ‘monomonstrous’. Each contains at least more than one broad type of monster within the game. *Ghost of Tsushima* would be an exception here if *oni* are excluded due to not being a part of the ‘main’ game. Nonetheless, *The Witcher* and *Pokémon* stand out, with both offering a very wide variety of monster-types. (For *Pokémon*, I have only included in the graph those in the game series who seem most strongly depicted as monstrous.) Perhaps in connection with this, both are quite explicitly engaged in the computational containment of monsters. *Pokémon* in, of course, defeating and capturing the various *Pokémon*; *The Witcher* in encountering new monsters and learning the specific counter-tactics needed to defeat them. Encyclopedic containment—particularly when it is more explicit—seems to accompany works which employ multiple monster-types, perhaps because the introduction of several monster-types draws the semantic centre towards the untangling of and distinguishing between those types as a means of reducing their (perceived) threat.

With excess as a core part of monstrosity, Cohen’s (1996, p. 6) thesis that the monster is the harbinger of category crisis is worth revisiting, because it is in the monster’s excess that it problematises established categories. We can see different ways in which category crises in the games analysed are affirmed and cemented. In *Pokémon* and *Doom*, monsters ultimately pose little challenge to established categories. It is perhaps for this reason that it is difficult to consider *Pokémon* monsters at all. In *Doom*’s case, the strong two-world construction means that the established categories simply distinguish between things of this world

and things of that world, and the door between those worlds is to be shut—the demons themselves are unproblematically cast aside. The possessed or zombified human enemies, however, could pose more of a challenge, but this perhaps instead underscores that the category crisis is in the permeation between our world and Hell, such that it is infesting beings of our world.

Despite *The Witcher*'s encyclopedic mode, it is also a gameworld full of monstrous category crises. For example, creatures like the wraith represent a category crisis between living and dead. This is resolved encyclopaedically, by learning the steps necessary to once again separate these realms. As the bestiary recommends: "pierce the corpse with an aspen stake, cut off the head and place it between the corpse's legs. To make certain that the wraith will never return, set the corpse on fire" (CD Projekt Red, 2007). Monsters in *The Witcher* are often not simply slain or banished, but are defeated in a way which corresponds to the specific category crisis they represent. In a somewhat ironic co-option of this, however, it is worth noting that this category-crisis-mending ritual being codified so rigidly demonstrates a containment even of the category crisis itself. The monster remains as a perpetual but manageable crisis. The focus may then be turned more onto Geralt, who occupies an uncomfortable position as not-quite-hero and often considered a monster, perhaps subtly pushing back against the affirmation of the monstrosity of others—i.e., if everyone is to some extent a monster (including Geralt, the Bloody Baron, a wraith and the denizens of the Wild Hunt), then no one is a monster.

Some of these category crises can also be said to be more in dialogue with real-world crises. *Senua's Sacrifice* would be perhaps the prime example of this, where the game's semantic centre of monstrosity and Senua's relationship to monstrosity is linked to discourses on psychosis specifically and mental illness and neurodivergence more broadly. The crises Senua experiences of whether her condition is curse, gift or neither, how to accept her difference as a part of herself, and how a community reacts to that are crises that are more directly relatable to many than those depicted (and perhaps resolved) in, for example, *Pokémon*. Geralt may also feature here as well. The discourse surrounding the difficulty of characterising his heroism (or lack thereof) is telling. Geralt being a monstrous monster-hunter, not particularly heroic as we would normally understand it, but still fighting the forces of evil, serves in itself to trouble societal categories. As we play, we are invited to reflect on Geralt's ambiguous position in the world as we encyclopaedically explore it, each new addition to the bestiary helping us to understand the monsters of the world, but coming no closer to understanding Geralt's position as a necessary but hated outsider, for the most part.

A mytholudic approach tends to reveal multiple layers of mythologisation, most notably here in *Senua's Sacrifice* and *Ghost of Tsushima*. Each offer some level of more explicit, surface-level mythologies which form the focus of the games. But in both cases the most foregrounded mythologies are not actually the centre of meaning, serving instead to support other mythologies not so explicitly raised. In *Senua's Sacrifice*, the outward Norse and Pictish elements serve the underlying mythologies of mental illness, while in *Ghost of Tsushima* an outward critique of samurai mythology and Mongol invasion actually belies a mythologisation of the samurai as good and favoured by nature itself, with the Mongols made monstrous as a destructive, babbling horde defiling nature.

The example of *Doom* demonstrates that by analysing in particular those unthinking, ‘because it was cool’ choices in games, we can excavate how those choices came to be so obvious and default. We can see how these choices are used as part of games for which have no lofty intentions of telling a great story. This is not a criticism. Rather, *Doom* is clearly a game in which you’re just meant to be able to shoot things first and foremost, and that is what makes it great for so many; it is its mythologies that allow all of the necessary framing to be there, but to also be as unobtrusive as possible. This also makes it unlike the other games analysed, which all strive to create detailed and thoughtful stories and gameworlds.

Mytholudics helps show how monstrosity is mythologised throughout all aspects of the game. How are threatening, anxiety-inducing and category-defying monsters constructed within a game? We find largely a palimpsest. Monstrosity arises from not one but usually multiple interlocking mythologies. Unpicking these and seeing how they are organised reveals what cultural work the monsters in the game are doing.

# 7 REFLECTIONS ON HEROES, MONSTERS AND MYTHOLUDICS

By its very nature, myth resists neatness and containment. My preceding argument, from the literature review to the analytical chapters, is testament to the methodological challenge of engaging with myth. Due to its totalising complexity, it requires a vast, telescopic perspective, but at the same time many aspects can only be prised out with microscopic analysis. Drawing artificial boundaries seemed counterproductive. Instead, I embrace this complexity and analytical resistance. Both the macro and the micro, the *as* and the *through* myth. I chose to give my study focus by using two interconnected constellations of myth in and surrounding games as lenses to hone a mytholudic approach.

Heroism and monstrosity are only two of many lenses that I could have chosen. I also considered lenses like space and community, which would no doubt have opened up other interesting avenues. But I do have to stop somewhere, and heroism and monstrosity have a number of features that make them work well together. Chiefly, they are—intuitively at least—opposites. That HERO SLAYS MONSTER is such a recurring motif in all kinds of contexts is telling. We have heroes because we have monsters to banish. If anyone could banish them, they wouldn't be threatening enough to be monsters, so we need extraordinary people—heroes—to step in. In this sense, they define each other. They are in some way opposite directions for mythologisation: one toward the reification of an individual as extraordinary and idealised, the other toward the crystallisation of that which we abhor and reject. This makes them a useful pairing to consider mythologisation in different contexts, with enough shared ground to better see what mytholudics is offering.

This closeness also introduces difficulty, however. The two concepts are often quite intertwined. My analysis of *Doom* spends around a third of the time talking about the hero, Doomguy. Likewise, my analysis of *Skyrim* dedicates significant space to dragons and draugr. This is not an oversight, but a reflection of the fact that heroes and monsters often figure into each other's definition. The two can also often overlap—Geralt is ostensibly the hero of *The Witcher*, yet is considered a monster by many in the gameworld, barely tolerated for his ability to kill other monsters. This is not uncommon to a certain extent, both amongst my examples and beyond. The Dragonborn and Alduin in *Skyrim* share dragon blood and *Thu'um*. Harry Potter sparks outrage when he speaks Parseltongue, because the only other known speaker is Voldemort, the great evil. This is because the hero and the monster are both in some way othered. The hero, in their extraordinariness, is necessarily quite *weird*.

This manifests in a number of ways. Sometimes the hero is hated but tolerated for their prowess and role in defeating the monster, like Geralt. Sometimes the hero's journey changes them so fundamentally that they simply cannot reintegrate into society, like Frodo at the end of *The Lord of the Rings*. Sometimes the hero must sacrifice themselves to accomplish their quest, like Beowulf, Aliya in one of the endings of *Heaven's Vault*, or Desmond and Layla in *Assassin's Creed III* and *Valhalla*, respectively. Often the hero will embody some of the same traits that the monster does precisely to expose the fragility of the boundary of those elements from both within and without. Because of this, it is not surprising that some analysis of the monster must figure into analysis of the hero and vice versa.

I mentioned that the hero- and monster-types have a significant difference. While the monster-types fall quite neatly on three reversible axes, the hero-types do not. While an opposite to the *preordained hero* might be something like the *everyday hero*, what would be the opposite to the *hero-victim*? Does the *sung hero* make sense as a type? Not really. It is important to stress here once more that these types are analytical tools and not intended as a robust typology as such, but the difference is striking. I suggest that this tells us something about monstrosity and heroism. Namely, that heroism is the mythologisation of *positive* traits, while monstrosity is the mythologisation of *excess* and *not* of negative traits per se. This radical simplification of the two lenses helps us understand some crucial differences between heroism and monstrosity as mythological constructs. And, furthermore, it may help in explaining why even after spending hundreds of pages trying to isolate one from the other in my analyses, they always point back to each other.

Consider this from the perspective of the types I have laid out. I have established that the monster-types form pairs representing opposite ends of a spectrum. *Natural* and *artificial* monstrosity are opposing in that a monster cannot be fully *both* simultaneously, but they are a spectrum in that a monster can embody aspects of both. Likewise *within-without* and Švelch's *contained-sublime* poles. While there is an argument that this can apply to *preordained* versus *everyday* heroes, we cannot have *victim-not-victim* or *sceptical-credulous* spectrums. The negation of these two types is not a part of the heroic construction. They may be a part of the character's construction, but then the heroism emerges *despite* that trait. One can be a hero *and* not victimised, but they cannot be a hero *because* they are not victimised. Or take traits that figure in many other definitions of heroism, such as bravery or altruism. One can be a hero and be cowardly, but one cannot be a hero *because* they are cowardly. In such cases, it is the *overcoming* of cowardice that figures into the heroic construction. Likewise a selfish hero: selfishness is either overcome as part of the heroic construction, or problematises it. For example, Geralt's selfishness prompts caveated labels like "no-hero" (Michalska, 2020, p. 28) or "anti-hero" (Sepetci, 2021, p. 59).

This formulation might appear more as an ontology of heroism and monstrosity, something I explicitly intended to not to produce. However, it is still the case that both are discursive categories and, as such, have a great degree of freedom as to how any given hero or monster is constructed. However, they are discursive towards a particular goal, and the pursuit of that goal puts restrictions on the mythological construction. Heroism, as I have said, is the mythologisation of an individual into an aspirational, idealised, elevated figure. This means that in serving the goal of this discourse, elements opposed to that goal can only enter

into the construction as (a) obstacles to be overcome, (b) irrelevant, or (c) self-critical of its own construction. Monsters, on the other hand, are the mythologisation of that which is deemed to threaten the social order or sociocultural boundaries. As such, monstrosity can arise from both negative traits and from otherwise good traits taken to a threatening excess.

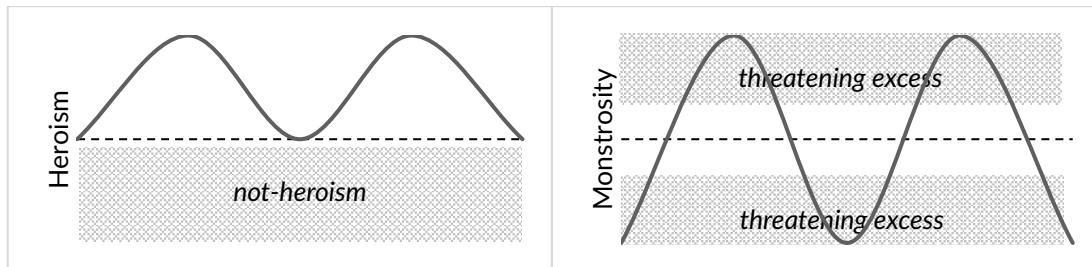


Figure 21. Wave-line visualisations depicting the difference between the discursive goals of heroism and monstrosity.

This graphic (Figure 21) may help to visualise the distinction. The opposite to the value at the basis of the construction of heroism (e.g., scepticism) is not another kind of heroism, it is not-heroism (e.g., credulousness). The opposite to the value at the basis of the construction of monstrosity (e.g., nature in excess) is another kind of monstrosity (e.g., artifice in excess). An argument could be made about villainy occupying the grey, ‘not-heroism’ zone in the wave-line visualisation above (Figure 21)—villainy as a negative form of heroism. However, I am hesitant to co-opt villainy within the realm of heroism in that way. A proper treatment of villainy in this context would instead constitute an additional mytholudic lens and as such would require significant further study.

What is also significant here is the notion of threat for monstrosity and of promise for heroism. An entity is only made monstrous by the discourse of threat. This could be a politician depicting immigrants as monstrous due to the supposed threat of them taking ‘our’ jobs, women, country, etc. Or seeing a dragon as monstrous because it threatens to turn our village to ashes. Or the doppelgänger, who threatens to steal one’s life and identity, or to commit evil acts in one’s name. In other words, part of the monster’s construction seems to be an implied motif to do with causing harm to the society discursivising the entity as a monster. For example, [{→ DRAGON BURNS VILLAGE}] is the implied, immanent consequence, the threat, of not slaying or banishing it. The hero is then the figure who puts themselves at risk in an attempt to prevent the immanent motif from actualising. Note that the hero does not *have* to actually prevent it, they just have to put themselves at risk in pursuit of that. Consider the ending of *Halo: Reach* (Bungie, 2010) in which our heroes are all killed. Their fight contributes to humanity’s ultimate victory over the Covenant, but Noble Team do not in themselves end the monstrous threat. Stories do not typically end in the failure of the hero, but that is only because that is considered to make a less compelling story. By the same token, the monster is already the monster because of the *threat* they pose—they do not actually have to *follow through* on that threat. Both the hero and the monster are in some sense mythologisations of the future, of promise or threat. It is for this reason that they both define each other and are intertwined in their constitution. Massumi discusses the affective salience of threat, observing that “the uncertainty of the potential next is never consumed in any

given event. ... The future of threat is forever" (2010, p. 53). The monster is a monster because the threat they threaten is already affectively real. In this way it is perhaps the centrality of threat in the construction of the hero and the monster that means that both always return.

Indeed, both seem to have a close relationship with mythical time. Besides this orientation towards the future, both the hero and the monster often emerge from a mythic past. This is borne out in my examples:

	Game	Past	Future
Heroes	<i>Call of Duty</i>	The series dipping into conflicts of the past while maintaining a stable heroic construction situates each hero in a continuous line of <i>hero-victims</i> .	The extrapolation of that heroic spirit into hypothesised future conflicts shows that the threat is eternally inevitable, and so too are the <i>hero-victims</i> who must face it.
	<i>The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim</i>	The formulation of the prophecy instantiates the hero and the monster in time immemorial, placing their origin in a deep, mythical past.	Prophecy by its nature mythologises a model of the future, which <i>Skyrim</i> then fulfils with the Last Dragonborn and Alduin.
	<i>Assassin's Creed</i>	The omnihistorical conspiracy situates the Assassins as a heroic tradition stretching into the deep mythical past, connected through the Animus by genetic memory.	The Assassin–Templar conflict stretches out into the future, combined with the persistent threat of the return of the Isu. Genetic memory also entails that all the progeny of Assassin lineage are potential heroes.
	<i>Heaven's Vault</i>	The death of the Nebula is shown to be a cycle that has repeated many times...	...and that will repeat many more times.
	<i>Horizon Zero Dawn</i>	Past human behavior destroys the ecosphere, which is reconstructed by AIs named after ancient gods. Aloy as a clone of Elisabet Sobeck is the last remaining connection to the Old Ones.	Although Aloy defeats HADES at the end of the game, the final cutscene shows the rogue AI escaping its core and being captured by the enigmatic Sylens, leaving a threatening cliffhanger.
Monsters	<i>Doom</i>	N/A	N/A
	<i>Pokémon</i>	The origin of Pokémons is a mystery, with many of the games' 'Mythical Pokémons' being in some way	The symmetrical structure of every game tells us that the same kinds of threat will always return and

		cosmogenic, pointing back toward a deep mythical past.	there will always be a need for a heroic trainer.
	<i>Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice</i>	Senua's inner demons represented as Norse mythological figures suggests a universality to her struggle that stretches back into the deep past.	N/A
	<i>Ghost of Tsushima</i>	Jin comes from a long line of heroic samurai whose traditional code proves ineffectual against this new monster.	The game ends with Jin exiled from the samurai order and on the run. Although the Khan is defeated, Jin stresses to Yuna at the end of the game that the Mongols "are stuck here, more desperate than ever to conquer our island".
	<i>The Witcher</i>	The witcher order is dwindling, with Geralt one of very few remaining. Ancient terrestrial monsters cohabit the land with post-Conjunction monsters, giving a sense of time.	<i>The Witcher 3</i> ends with a second Conjunction of the Spheres in which the Aen Seidhe leave, but many new peoples and monsters emerge, with the witches correspondingly emerging once again.

Table 7. Laying out the various ways in which the game examples' heroes and monsters relate to the past and the future.

Cohen's thesis that "the monster always escapes" (1996, p. 4) holds literally true in many of these examples. *Horizon Zero Dawn* makes sure to end with HADES escaping and being captured by Sylens; *Ghost of Tsushima* on a conversation in the epilogue stressing that the Mongols still infest the island and still pose a threat. In almost all other examples, even if not literally true, a future for monstrosity is still explicated, for example at the end of *The Witcher 3* with the Second Conjunction, or the structural implication in *Call of Duty* that war is inevitable and will always return. Likewise, that the monster always escapes means that the hero must always return. It is also very common for the hero to also be of the past in some way. Note how Aloy is in some sense the last of the Old Ones. Geralt is one of the very last witchers, a dwindling order. The Dragonborn in *Skyrim* is the Last Dragonborn. This is by no means universal, but it is a frequent construction, particularly in fantasy, echoing perhaps many of those ancient and classical heroic epics that look back nostalgically to a heroic golden age in a mythical past. In these cases, the hero is a figure of the past who returns to rescue the promise of the future. The underlying implication here is that the present has degraded from the past, unable to secure its own future. The hero as a figure of the past in this way mythologises this implication. Together, the hero and the monster bring a sense of cyclical, kairotic time to an otherwise linear, chronological paradigm. Both hero and monster

disrupt the sense of constant, inevitable, linear progress. This represents a tension. We want to be rid of the monster, but it always returns. We *also* want to be rid of the hero—note how few heroes end up loved and accepted by their community. That their failure to reintegrate into society is often part of the hero’s sacrifice shows that we are also uncomfortable with the presence of heroes, perhaps because of their many similarities with the monster: Geralt is treated as a monster; Aloy’s relationship with technology is treated with suspicion; *Call of Duty* stresses frequently that if you fail, you will be blamed and disowned, and if you succeed, no one will ever know. This is not *always* the case, but it very often is. The hero is by definition different and *weird*, as well as having potentially terrifying power, and thus treated with suspicion at the very least.

I have listed two exceptions in Table 7, however, to the sense of time evoked by heroes and monsters: *Doom* and *Senua’s Sacrifice*. Neither in my reading has a particularly strong sense of mythic time, neither past nor future. With *Doom*, this is perhaps not surprising given that its mythologisation is geared towards being as unthinking, unreflective as possible. Mainly, we learn very little of the past in *Doom*’s gameworld, and the threat posed by the monsters is simply to the life of this one isolated marine. It is telling that the mythic past and future are explored much more in later games in the series, but the first game is more focused on simple moment-to-moment combat. *Senua’s Sacrifice*, though, is more surprising in this regard. This is primarily to do with how personal Senua’s quest is. In some ways *Senua’s Sacrifice* is the bleakest form of postapocalypse. She finds her society already utterly destroyed in her absence as a hermit. There are no people for her to altruistically put herself at risk for, no embers of the pre-apocalypse society to nurture. Her quest is the desperate reclamation of a part of her past—not a mythic past per se, but part of her actual, lived past. She comes from no longstanding heroic order. The monsters do however, in a sense. As figures of Norse folklore—a culture which is not her own—they broaden out Senua’s personal internal struggles into one which connects into a wider mythology. This corroborates the notion that monstrosity is at the semantic centre of *Senua’s Sacrifice*. The game is more about Senua’s personal battle with her inner demons in conflict with acceptance of her condition than it is about Senua being elevated to heroism of some kind.

Both monstrosity and heroism are discursive categories. Monsters and heroes do not exist as such prior to their being labelled one or the other (or both). Both are ascriptions by others that identify a hero or monster by relating their promise or threat to their mode of being. The ascription is circular. An entity  $x$  is perceived in some way to threaten society (its norms, boundaries, taboos, etc.). To foster consensus for the expulsion or elimination of  $x$ , this threat is ascribed to its nature:  $x$  is a monster. This directionality (threat comes before the ascription of monstrosity) is reversed through mythologisation, whereby the fact that  $x$  is a monster and *therefore* is threatening is naturalised. Monster as a discursive label is disguised as an ontological one. Saying that someone or something *is* a monster is making a claim about their being rather than an ethical judgement, even though it is really an ethical judgement. By deflecting discourse towards ontology in this way, ethical reflection is impeded and discussion stifled, making political agendas appear neutral, natural and inevitable.

That their labelling comes about as a result of discourse—rhetoric, persuasion, argumentation, negotiation, authority—also means that as part of the mythologisation, we must also consider how patterns of discourse reproduce and percolate within communities, between communities and over time. In doing so, we arrive at various mythological patterns, some of which can be seen in the hero- and monster-types I laid out. These do not deny the great variation in the heroes and monsters we engage with, but are rather a way of comparing them based on some fundamental similarities and some crucial differences.

I have discussed how heroes and monsters, despite having different discursive goals, often overlap and figure in each other's construction. This is a difficult dynamic to unpick, but that is where I have found a mytholudic approach to be a great help. By systematically laying out the integers, motifs and themes in games, we can examine individually and compare both intra- and inter-game the core meaningful structures behind the production of the game-world and its central agents, as well as how the player figures into that. The concept of the semantic centre helps to establish, based on those analyses, how those various integers, motifs and themes are organised and hierarchised within the meaning production of the game. This semantic centre can emerge from the method of analysis, whereby each example is composed of mini essays, each dealing with a different mythology or interconnected set of mythologies, for example military techno-fetishism in *Call of Duty*, the mythology of birds of prey in *Assassin's Creed*, the significance of Mars in *Doom*, and so on. In writing these, it becomes apparent how they connect to each other. Whether, for example, they are organised into hierarchies, where writing about one mythology reveals that it is primarily in place to support another, or whether there is some underlying conception of heroism (for instance) that underlies each mythological construction. These connections can be made and remade on each level of granularity, from the individual game to considering a set of games together under one lens, to comparing two sets of games under two lenses.

This approach also allows us to in some sense take a game for what it is. By that I mean that this approach is not concerned with drawing a line between what is and is not considered the game's narrative, story, mechanics, gameplay, and so on. It is concerned with what the game says about itself. The way in which the game produces meaning will be individual, relying on different elements. *Skyrim*, for instances, draws a great deal of meaning out of its openness and the ability for the player to choose. The very fact of this possibility is a part of its meaning, as well as how those choices proceed. *Call of Duty*, in constructing the *hero-victim*, uses *not* having choice as part of its meaning. The nonlinear traversal of games is not *absent* in *Call of Duty*—one can relatively freely walk around, choose not to progress and so on—but it is not a central part of its meaning-making. The attempts of total simplification of ethical discourse in *Doom* and the promise of complete monstrous containment in *Pokémon* are similarly original, yet extremely influential ludic meaning-making approaches. Through the analyses presented here, it has become apparent that mytholudics runs the full gamut found outside the realm of digital games. While *Call of Duty* and *Doom* allow us to study how practices of mythologisation are employed in digital games, we equally find examples like *Heaven's Vault* and *Senua's Sacrifice* which present complex, multifaceted engagement with mythologies of heroes as well as monsters.

Approaching the game on its own terms is where the as/through distinction comes to the fore. Each game is doing something *different* with mythologies, sometimes with intention, sometimes not. The difficulty of analysing *Pokémon* through the lens of existing mythologies is a good example. Nothing quite seems to fit, neither the existing ideas of monstrosity I tried to read it through, nor existing mythologies of human–monster relations. Situating the series more locally through Japanese mythologies such as from the *yōkai* tradition also proves not entirely satisfactory. This not-quite-fittingness is encapsulated in the fact that the *folkloresque* seems the most satisfactory approach. Yes, we can find similarities and affinities, influences and lineages within *Pokémon*, but it is never quite clear-cut. Particularly because *Pokémon* is such a transcultural phenomenon, the influences can be so mixed and varied that they are impossible to prise out. At some point, we have to recognise that *Pokémon* are *Pokémon*. *Pokémon-as-myth*. Taken on their own terms, we see the centrality of *Pokémon* to their gameworld, how a given *Pokémon*–trainer relationship is associated with various partials and motifs such that there is not one kind of relationship, but that instead the kind of relationship is a signal. This relationship draws on the *kawaisa* nature of *Pokémon*: cute and subservient, but with a great power and fierceness too, a combination with great potential for abuse. The mythologies *Pokémon* draws from are no doubt vital to understanding the series, but we must also pay attention to what emulated mythologies are created within the gameworld, which apply to those who live there and whose world we visit when we play.

Likewise, games like *Senua’s Sacrifice* explicitly construct a world *through* myth. Mythologies we are already familiar with (to at least some extent) are deployed to construct a gameworld we feel is already in some way familiar. But, as that discussion demonstrates, this deployment is not the end of the story. *How* and *why* the game uses those mythologies is vitally important. *What relations between* mythologies are created is then the next step. How are they arranged and hierarchised? Reading *Senua’s Sacrifice* in this way *through* myth allows us to see how meaning is created in the game by the particular use of mythologies.

Of course, it is never so clear-cut as either-as-or-through. The point is to be able to oscillate between the two. To move from an analysis of mythologies as they are drawn into and used by the game to an analysis of those emulated mythmaking processes that construct the truth of the gameworld. That is the goal here: what is the *truth* of the gameworld. How is the gameworld understood by its inhabitants? Then, how is that understanding presented to the player? How is the player invited in or kept at arm’s length? The player then provides the bridge to the ‘real world’. Because while the gameworld is accepted as true while the player is in it, they at some point return to a world with different truths, and with different models for understanding it. This dual perspective, the straddling of worlds is the crux of the meaning-making process. The difference between worlds reveals mythologies because it reveals how things can be otherwise where that ‘otherwise’ is otherwise precluded.

# 8 CONCLUSION

I set out to develop a mythological framework for the analysis of games. While there are many mythological frameworks, none have been developed for games. The use of mythology in game studies suffers, in my view, from a number of problems: an overreliance on Campbell's Hero's Journey; ambiguous use of the term *myth*; a lack of engagement with the vast body of myth scholarship, especially as approached by folklore studies; and an overemphasis on myth as narrative. Some of these issues are beginning to be addressed. Jennings' (2022) problematising of the Hero's Journey via a reading of *Horizon Zero Dawn* is part of a very small literature within game studies that is actually seriously critical of Campbell. The recently funded LUDOMYTHOLOGIES project headed by Navarro-Remesal and Planells (2022) is also promising, demonstrating an increased interest in more holistic and robust mythological frameworks for game analysis. I do not claim to be the only researcher working on these problems I have outlined, nor do I claim to have 'solved' them with this project. I do hope to have contributed to the discussion, though, offering others the tools to conduct more robust and consistent mythological analyses, introducing underused scholarship to the study of games, and opening up questions and fruitful debates.

With mytholudics, I propose to view mythologies as models for making sense of the world which proclaim to be natural rather than contingent, propositional models. I argue that a hermeneutic approach framed by Barthesian mythology and operationalised by Frog's mythic discourse analysis is a useful way to approach the multimodal, multifaceted, combinatorial nature of games. I propose to view games as an organising structure for mythologies that are engaged with through play and interpretation.

Seeing games both *as* and *through* myth is important to do separately. In considering games *through* myth the focus shifts to the broader temporal and cultural dimension. Here we consider the permeation of mythologies from wider societies, the historical traditions that are drawn from, and how those mythologies affect the playing and interpretation of the game. Games *through* myth considers the game as a snapshot through which we can see how mythologies *here* and *now* have influenced the production and interpretation of the game.

For best results, the two approaches are synthesised: *as/through*. How is the organising structure of the game constructed out of a specific mythic environment? And how is that game played and interpreted? In doing so, we can see how mythologies exist in a lineage, morphing from some cultural context to another across time and space. Whether these are considered 'the same' mythology is a Ship of Theseus problem. Over time, the signs that make up a mythology are replaced or given new meaning, like rotten planks of a ship. These are not replaced all at once, but gradually, one by one. The same myth today can look quite different to how it did in the past. Mythology is always in flux, a contingent process that reacts and adapts to contemporary conditions, or else dies or fossilises. Mytholudics helps to investigate and identify both the individual planks that make up a myth, but to also approach the ossified core (to mix my metaphors), to see what integers or relations have been stable

over time and built on top of. The point is to see how we relate to our past and our cultural context by examining the virtual models of reality we create. The worlds we make and how we make them have a lot to do with the world we live in and how we understand it.

In this concluding chapter, I begin by offering a summary of the findings of all previous chapters. I then speculate on how this project could be applied and areas for future research, before offering some concluding remarks about mytholudics and the dissertation as a whole.

## 8.1 Summary

I began by arguing for an understanding of mythology as a model for making sense of the world. I then set out why games need a mythological framework tuned specifically to them and the centrality of play. From this, I posed the question:

*How does a mythological approach help to understand the way games make meaning?*

I then outline in broad strokes the previous research into myth and games and its problems, noting an uncritical overreliance on Campbell, an overemphasis on narrative, and a lack of holistic frameworks.

In ‘2 What is Myth?’, I first outline a number of the many different ways in which the term itself is understood. Then, I outline in more detail some of the most prominent theorisations of myth, splitting them into categories based on their fundamental definitions (explicit or implicit) of myth. These are myth as text type or genre, archetypal, explanation, structure, and discourse.

‘3 Towards Mytholudics’ is where I move into my own theorisation of myth. I discuss some of the core aspects of my understanding, from Barthesian myth and naturalisation to terms that I introduce, like ossification and fossilisation, referring to how mythologies develop over time and become both more rigid and embedded. I define mythology as such:

*Mythology is constituted of models for understanding the world. It works by framing a set of elements, asserting a natural relation between them and bringing them behind and out of culture.*

I then move towards the more game-specific aspects and how they relate to myth, such as game spatiality, game time, play, and virtuality and simulation to arrive at *mytholudics*.

In ‘4 Methods’, I operationalise mytholudics, describing how a mytholudic analysis should proceed. This is based on three pillars: Barthes’ concept of mythology, Frog’s mythic discourse analysis, and hermeneutics. Barthesian mythology establishes myth as a process or a form, rather than as an object and describes how to read a text mythologically. Mythic discourse analysis operationalises a broad understanding of myth for the purpose of comparing mythic discourse over time and between cultures. Hermeneutics is the process by which I interpret the games, with the previous two as a framework.

Next is the first of two major analytical chapters, ‘5 Heroes’. I begin with a literature review of some of the main strands of thinking on heroism from ancient times to the present day and situate that in relation to games, with particular consideration of the player-

playable figure relationship. The working understanding of *hero* is the mythologisation of an individual into an aspirational, idealised, elevated figure. From this understanding, I outline four hero-types. Intended to be aids for analytical comparison rather than exhaustive, these describe common and prominent heroic constructions. These are:

<i>Hero-victim</i>	A hero whose heroism is founded in their victimhood. Commonly used in war hero constructions, such as the conscripted soldier who does their best for their comrades in the face of hellish conditions.
<i>Hero-sceptic</i>	A hero whose heroism is founded in scepticism. A person who is in some way independent from or outside of a knowledge authority and who challenges that authority in pursuit of the truth, at great risk to themselves.
<i>Preordained hero</i>	Someone who was, in some way, born to be a hero or who is imbued with heroism by some divine power or fate. The hero of a prophecy or the son of a deity, for example.
<i>Unsung hero</i>	Either a partial or a meta-type. As a partial, it refigures the great risk that a hero takes, or consequence that they face, to be that their deeds go unknown or they do not receive recognition, or indeed they are cast as the villain. As a meta-type, it suggests that some figure of the past <i>was</i> a hero but has not been properly recognised as such.

With these types in place, I moved onto the five analyses: the *Call of Duty* series, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, the *Assassin's Creed* series, *Heaven's Vault* and *Horizon Zero Dawn*.

*Call of Duty* revolves around a *hero-victim* construction, whereby an innocent soldier is sent to a warzone, in some way abandoned or even betrayed by their superiors. In these circumstances, the squad becomes the context for heroism, with brave soldiers doing what they can for comrades in a dire situation. Crucially, the war is depoliticised and the soldier is insulated from responsibility for the overall conflict.

*Skyrim* centres on a *preordained hero* in the Dragonborn. This heroic certainty in the form of prophetic destiny provides the anchor for the openness of the rest of the game, where the Dragonborn can be of any of the gameworld's races, any gender, and can join either of opposing factions. Political and social problems within the gameworld are shown to be eternal, inevitable and intractable, solved only by the *preordained hero*—but towards whichever end the player wants.

*Assassin's Creed* combines a conspiratorial *hero-sceptic* mode with a technologized *preordained hero*. Conspiracy is shown to be the basic mode on which the world operates, in which there is always another layer of truth and deception. The real truth can only be found by a *preordained hero* in the form of the genetic progenies of specific bloodlines.

*Heaven's Vault*, although much lauded for a more realistic depiction of archaeologists than the field is used to, still constructs a lone *hero-sceptic* in Aliya, whose differences from her colleagues at the university prove vital in discovering the real reason for the nebula's

death. The *hero-sceptic* construction is firmly rooted throughout the game, operating in its spatial configuration, core gameplay mechanics and plot.

*Horizon Zero Dawn* also combines a *hero-sceptic* with a technologized *preordained hero*. Aloy's unique connection to the preapocalyptic past and upbringing as an outcast position her as a cross-cultural wanderer. Through her, we see how each tribe in the gameworld mythologises the world differently. And because of our position as players who are implicitly a part of the preapocalyptic society, we can see through these emulated mythologies because we know the 'truth'. Additionally, through the structure of the game and its gameplay, its anticapitalist, ecological, feminist message seems undermined by a connection to traditional monomythic structures.

Considering these together, I show that most of the games analysed make use of multiple heroic constructions. The *hero-sceptic* and the *preordained hero* both prove sticky, appearing together but also nestled in the other games. This demonstrates a tension between the spiritual, nostalgic *preordained hero* and the scientific, progressive *hero-sceptic*. Nevertheless, most of the games have a clear 'core' heroic construction. By looking closely at the models of heroism in games with a mytholudic approach, I argue that we can better understand what values and what understanding of the world is being communicated by the game.

Following these is the next analytical chapter, '6 Monsters'. I likewise begin with a literature review of some of the main strands of monster theory. I consider how game studies has responded to and applied monster theory. I define *monster* as a discursive category, the mythologisation of an entity into an abject, othered, threatening figure. I lay out four monster-types, again not exhaustive but intended as analytical aids for comparison:

*Monster from within* The conceptualisation of an entity as fundamentally monstrous in themselves.

*Monster from without* The conceptualisation of an entity or society as being invaded by monstrosity from the outside. This can be the possession of an individual or some kind of portal to another realm from which monsters come.

*Artificial monster* Monsters seen as aberrant human creations, whether accidental or intentional.

*Monster of nature* Monsters who are an excessive manifestation of the natural world or of otherwise natural beings.

With these types, I analyse five examples: *Doom*, the *Pokémon* series, *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice*, *Ghost of Tsushima* and *The Witcher* series.

*Doom*'s monsters belie a broader strategy of making the task of running and gunning as uncomplicated as possible. Doomguy is a generic, 'badass' marine; Mars a barren wasteland with no chance for collateral damage, and the demons are a pure incarnation of evil from another world. Something particularly interesting about *Doom* is exploring how it draws on mythologies in order to *simplify* it. It uses myth to avoid rather than provoke critical reflection, letting the player focus on shooting.

*Pokémon* represents something of a challenge. *Pokémon* would not typically be considered ‘monsters’, and yet it is a part of the portmanteau name: Pocket Monsters. Here, I examine what kind of creatures *Pokémon* are exactly and what mythologies are drawn on in their construction, and whether and how that construction relates to monsters, arguing that they ultimately create their own category—*Pokémon* are *Pokémon*—but in the folkloresque mode most associated with Japanese *yōkai*. I consider also the fact that *Pokémon* is a trans-national, transcultural phenomenon, impacting not only in its marketing, but also in its development.

*Senua’s Sacrifice* is explicit in its pitting of Pictish (in Senua) and Norse (her enemies) mythologies against each other. However, it also connects these to modern discourses surrounding mental illness and psychosis. I argue that the traditions explicitly drawn on are drawn on in service of two competing mythologies that serve as the game’s semantic centre: Senua’s psychosis as *superpower* or as *inner demon*. The game organises its mythological constellation around these two central propositions, and by pitting them against each other also exposes them as mythologies, leading to a synthesis at the end of the game.

*Ghost of Tsushima* establishes through mythology a dichotomy between the ‘pure’ Japanese samurai order and the ‘impure’ Mongol invaders. The Mongols are mythologised as monstrous in a number of ways, such as in positioning them not only as political invaders, but as against the very nature of the island itself, which seems to be naturally affiliated with the samurai. Despite Jin as a playable figure exposing the shortcomings of the samurai way and blurring the boundaries between samurai and Mongol, those shortcomings are still only strategic. The mythology itself is not challenged, even by the liminal figure of Jin.

*The Witcher* depicts a fundamentally monstrous world, centred on the Conjunction of the Spheres which introduces a host of different peoples and creatures. Geralt is himself also monstrous, reinforced by the fact that he does not fit into a particularly heroic role despite being the primary playable figure. This centres the game on the encyclopedic containment of the gameworld’s abundant monstrosity. Monsters in the game are of diverse types and represent unresolvable category crises, cementing the monstrosity at the heart of the game.

I conclude the chapter with a section that explores the links between all the analyses. Like with heroes, I show that games very rarely use only a single monster-type. Particularly when there are a number of different monster-types, like in *The Witcher*, encyclopedic containment comes to the fore as the focus turns to distinguishing between different kinds of monsters and how to defeat them. I also note a distinction between how the category crises heralded by monsters are dealt with in each game. In some games, it is evoked but the solution is clear. For example, in *Doom*, the solution is to blast them all back to hell. Other monsters retain a boundary-blurring effect, such as in *The Witcher* with monsters that straddle the realms of the dead and the living. Others, like *Senua’s Sacrifice*, use monstrosity as a way of tapping more directly into real-world category crises and mythologies of monstrosity, such as those surrounding people with psychosis.

Finally, in ‘7 Reflections on Heroes, Monsters and Mytholudics’, I consider all ten examples and the two lenses of heroism and monstrosity together, and reflect on mytholudics as a method. I note that the types I established in each chapter had different qualities. In particular, while the monster-types are comprised of multiple reversible axes (within-without;

nature–artifice; contained–sublime), the hero-types are not similarly reversible. One can have a hero who is heroic because they are sceptical, but not because they are credulous (if they are, then that is incidental to their heroism). In this way, while heroism and monstrosity may seem like opposites, they actually function differently: heroism by positive mythologisation and monstrosity by mythologisation of excess. I also observe that almost every example features both heroes and monsters whose mythologisation is at least partly defined by a mythic past and a mythic future. Heroes are often *of* the past in some way, such as being the last of a dying breed, and likewise monsters are seen as a recurring force that can never be truly vanquished. Similarly, a future for both heroism and monstrosity is almost always left open in the games, showing that there is no final closure to their mythologisation. I restate that ‘hero’ and ‘monster’ are discursive categories, and so by looking at how those labels are applied, what we are actually analysing are the values behind them that are being mythologised in these entities.

## 8.2 Future work and applications

This project has been developed primarily as a theoretical framework for the analysis of games. There are a number of ways that this work can be used, some of which stem from that primary intention, some of which are adjacent or tangential to it (but no less important because of that).

Most straightforwardly, mytholudics can be used as a framework for the analysis of games. This can mean using the procedures outlined in this dissertation to read a specific game as/through myth, or to compare the mythic constellations of multiple games based on certain criteria. A number of criteria could be fruitful. For example, analysing all the games of a particular series. My analyses of *Call of Duty* and *Assassin’s Creed*, for example, could easily have stretched longer to consider the games in more detail and better compare the subseries. Or one could analyse all the games of a specific developer. I have not engaged much with the FromSoftware games (which may surprise people who know me and my taste in games), but it strikes me that a mytholudic comparison between all of their games could go a long way to identifying that specific FromSoftware ‘feeling’ and why their games have become so prominent. One might also look at a particular local games industry, for example comparing the mythologies of a set of Copenhagen-based developers. Furthermore, I have noted that my corpus of games is relatively limited. There is plenty more to be developed within both heroes and monsters, including possible types that I have not touched on. It may also make sense to contrast the hero with the villain rather than the monster, which would provide a different kind of comparison.

One could also take a myth-first approach, whereby a particular mythology is outlined and then a set of games hypothesised to deal with that mythology in some way are selected and analysed, comparing how each game differently uses the same mythology. The analysis in this dissertation could also be extended along similar lines, but with additional lenses to heroism and monstrosity. In particular, I would have liked to explore mythologies of *space* and *community*. Space is often argued to be central to understanding games (Aarseth, 2001a; Aarseth & Günzel, 2019; Bakkerud, 2022; Bonner, 2021; Günzel, 2010; Whistance-Smith,

2021). Some scholars, like Aguirre Quiroga (2022), have explored game space through a mythic lens, and I think these kinds of analyses can be expanded. After all, space and its traversal is deeply tied up with sociocultural values and structures of power (de Certeau, 1984; Lefebvre, 1974/2011; Soja, 1989/2011; Virilio, 1977/2006), and is an often subtle means by which our view of the world can be shaped. The ways in which communities are structured can also be shaped or defined by mythologies as I understand them (e.g., Anderson, 1983/2006 writes of nationalist mythologies). What constitutes a lens is quite open as it is primarily a way to delimit and organise analysis and comparisons. Any criteria by which it makes sense to delimit mythologies in order to answer particular questions could work.

The individual analyses in this dissertation can also be useful on their own and taken to further the discussion of, for example, *Senua's Sacrifice* or *Heaven's Vault*. Though my intention was for these analyses to exemplify the method, they would not be particularly good examples if they were not useful and insightful analyses in themselves. If one is not particularly interested in the theoretical approach and method itself, then these analyses can be taken as standalone.

More empirical, player-focused studies could also be conducted on the basis of this method or these analyses. These could include, for example, discourse analysis (Ensslin, 2012; Gee, 2015) of online player discussions, attempting to gather more empirically what 'the discourse' surrounding a game actually consists of and relating that to mytholudics. Or they could centre on specific communities of players and how they relate mythologically to a particular game or set of games, in the vein of an article like Bjørkelo's (2020) exploration of white nationalist interpretations of *Skyrim*.

I also hope that this dissertation contributes to the growing debate on mythology in/and/of games itself. In '3 Towards Mytholudics', I lay out what I believe is a useful theorising of myth as it applies to games and play. I invite others to disagree with my formulation, and in these cases, I hope that my theorisation can spur further discussion on how myth relates to games and play and vice versa. In this vein, my theorisation could also be more systematically compared with other theories of the meaning production of games, such as procedural rhetorics (Bogost, 2006, 2007).

This method could also prove useful for *designing* gameworlds as well as analysing them. Many game designers find that outlining and codifying *design pillars* is very good practice, helping to keep the game tight and cohesive and developers focused on what is most important for their game (Pears, 2017). This means thinking about and laying down the core concepts of one's game early on in the process. Having design pillars helps both for the reasons just mentioned, but also for efficient communication between team members and simpler communication to others in the form of pitches, marketing, funding applications, and so on. The framework outlined in this dissertation could provide the basis for analogous *worldbuilding pillars*. For example, instead of either committing to a specific plot or producing reams of cosmogenic lore from the off, early on in the process a team could decide on a set of core integers, motifs and themes that will govern worldbuilding. As in the analyses, these integers, motifs and themes can include gameplay motifs, but they may also not. This would allow a team in the process of worldbuilding to establish a semantic centre and a mythic core to their world without committing to any particular story or even characters.

This may help to maintain a cohesive ‘feel’ to the game as it develops, ensuring that writing, narrative, level, gameplay and character design are all singing from roughly the same hymn sheet.

## 8.3 Mythologies in flux and the Ship of Theseus

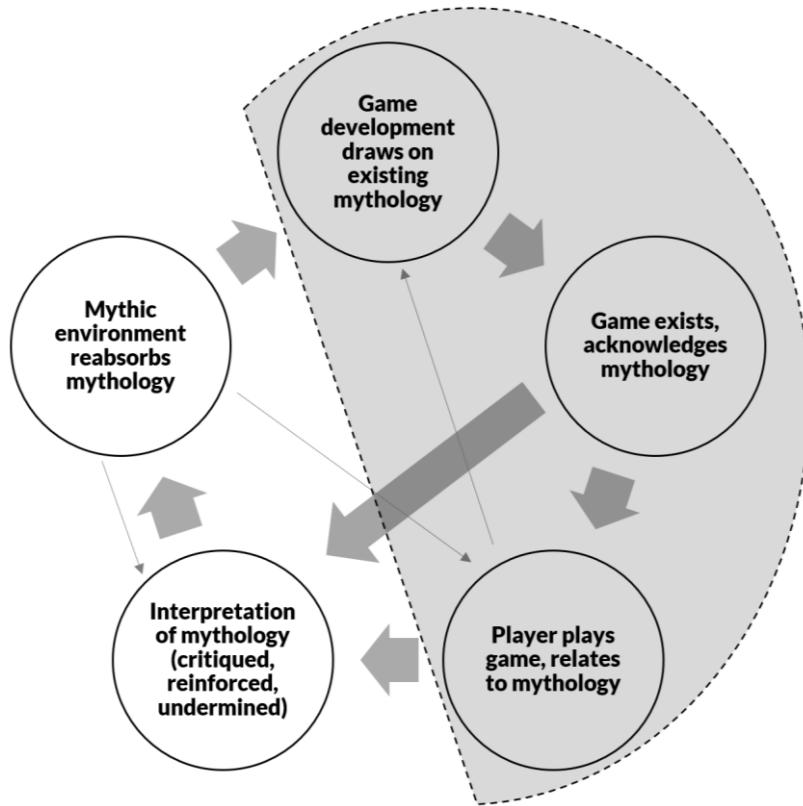


Figure 22. The mytholudic cycle.

Mytholudics provides a framework for understanding how games make meaning in a way that is tied to a cycle within a wider cultural context. Figure 22 shows this mytholudic cycle, which generalises the principles of mytholudics to a number of key findings. One is the omnipresence of mythology, its inescapability. Myth is everywhere. It is in the reason for why things have become the way they are and for why things will become the way they will be. That is because mythology is constituted by, in Frog’s words, “models of knowing the world and things in it” (2021a, p. 161). In Barthes’ (1972/2009) terms, myth is *form* and not *concept*—a way in which meaning is expressed rather than a thing expressed. These two formulations seem quite different but are compatible. The world is essentially too vast and complicated to understand everything in it individually from first principles. To aid our understanding, we produce models.

This occurs in any pursuit of knowledge. Rather than considering each animal individually, for example, scientists have produced models for classifying animals based on certain criteria. For example, the most common definition of the taxonomic rank *species* is the largest

group of organisms within which any two of those organisms can produce fertile offspring. At the edges, we ultimately find this definition to be at least somewhat arbitrary—hybrids, ring species and species complexes problematise this definition for example.

In music, we aid our manipulation of sound by constructing models. There is no particular reason why the twelve-tone division of the octave was developed in the West beyond the fact that provided a workable *model* for creating music. Other traditions use other models of music and produce no less creative, complex and pleasing works. Working with all of *sound* is just too monumentally complex and difficult, which is why we produce models that help us better understand and manipulate it. In Western music theory, the circle of fifths that arises out of the twelve-tone division of the octave provides a structure within which musicians can create sufficiently varied music, but using a set of rules and relations that makes that music easier to reliably produce. And, crucially, as a model it also helps with *prediction*. By using the circle of fifths, for example, a musician can produce musical ideas from the theory itself before playing it at all, knowing that that musical idea will have certain properties. Indeed, for this reason Frye (1957/2020) uses music as an analogy for his theory of myth, borrowing from it terms such as keys, rhythm, the circle of fifths and parallels. For him, music theory is to sound as mythical structures are to story.

Games work similarly as a model. “Games don’t matter”, Sicart writes (2014, p. 2). Games are just one part of “an ecology of playthings and play contexts, from toys to playgrounds, from political action to aesthetic performance” (2014, p. 4). We can think of these things also as *models* for play. They reduce play from the all-encompassing, intimidating notion of pure free play to a workable set of rules, affordances, systems and relations. The playground contains premises for how play should be conducted and affords those premises but is also abstract enough that it can suggest further ways of playing. Games likewise instantiate a certain model of play. Their predictive function is apparent in the way that we can play games and end up doing unexpected things, or that we can theorise based on how the game works what might happen if we do this or that and have a good chance of being correct.

We play with all models. Some models—like that of music—are made to be played *within*. Games are perhaps even more pronounced in this way, in that their sole *raison d’être* is to be played in and played with, foregrounding play as the whole *point* of their model. Reductively, music is *played* to produce pleasing sounds; games are *played* autotelically, simply for the pleasure of playing them. *Games are models for structuring play that instantiate real, historical or speculative models for understanding the world, which may be or include mythologies*. Hopefully, this definition I proposed in the introduction is one that makes sense within the context of this framework and has been useful for thinking through it.

Prediction is what makes for a successful model, even if we accept that the model is an incomplete picture of reality. Seen in light of Frog and Barthes’ formulation, mythology describes the models that we produce for understanding the world more generally. It provides a system of rules and relations between things, cascading into further implications, associations and relations. Sometimes, these models—intentionally or not—become so embedded as to become mistaken for reality itself. Many are surprised to learn that Western music theory is not universal, or that the note A does not correspond to one specific frequency. We can apply this same thinking to many mythologies and indeed nested systems of mythologies.

The *self-made billionaire* is a model for understanding (and predicting) how individuals become extremely wealthy. It is a bad model for sure—its descriptions inadequately describe reality and fail to predict future success—but a model nonetheless. What we might call Greek mythology is a system of interconnecting mythologies describing how a certain people understood the world, the cosmos, morality, and the place of humans. As a model, it could be used to make predictions: *if I appease Poseidon, then I will have a safer passage by sea.* (Nested within that is the prediction that *if I do x, then I will appease Poseidon.*) One thing Barthes stresses is the naturalisation of these models. Mythologies mask the fact that they are abstracted models of reality; the receiver of myth is guided to think of the mythology *as* reality. Mythologisation is in part about making its object precontextualised, appearing to predate the contingent circumstances in which it arises. Studying mythology in the Barthesian mode is about identifying these models and unmasking their naturalised assertions.

Mytholudics operationalises this process of unmasking for the context of games and play. In the cycle, the schematic representation of my understanding of mytholudics (Figure 22), I contend that game development draws on existing mythologies, somehow ‘putting them into’ the game. What does it mean for a mythology to be ‘in’ a game? That is a central question for mytholudics. In mytholudics, three aspects are core. First, the game itself as an artefact. Even if the game is *not* played—or regardless of who plays and how—what model of reality can we still analyse? What premises are instantiated in the gameworld? What is ‘true’ about the gameworld? Second, the role of play. This game-as-artefact is played by someone. How one chooses to play can affect various things, such as how the gameworld changes, how a story progresses, what happens, when things happen, and so on. Which of these can be affected by play and to what extent are at least in part defined by affordances built into the game artefact. Third, interpretation. The player in some way reacts to the mythologies in the game-as-artefact and the game-as-played. How does the player *understand* the game? They may also react to discourse surrounding the game, their own interpretation being affected by other interpretations.

In this way, mytholudics is a framework for considering play and game together. It accounts for how a model of reality is produced in the confluence between the constative gameworld (the game-as-artefact), the affordances in the game system for play, how play actually unfolds, and how all of that is reflected on. Each of these elements is individual for each game. With affordances for play, for instance, what we call ‘games’ run the full gamut from essentially interactive movies which afford only a handful of variations of experience, compared with vast, free open worlds in which seemingly every player does something totally different. This is not a problem for a mytholudic approach. Rather, both the systems themselves as well as how those systems are played can be considered together.

This ties into the common observation that digital games are a mix of different elements. Aarseth stresses that what we call ‘computer games’ are often “integrated crossmedia packages”, “software programs that can emulate any medium” (2012, p. 2). Mukherjee describes digital games as “a multiplicity of assemblages” (2015, p. 10). Matteo Bittanti writes that a videogame “is an electronic device that builds stories, creates new social dynamics, and generates possible and impossible spaces. A videogame is a set of experiences. A miniature world. A box of possibilities” (2007, p. 29). The game itself is found as an organising structure

for all these different elements. Even though a cutscene, taken by itself, would be more at home alongside film as a medium, we still see it as *part* of the game, because it is integrated into our playing and situated within the gameworld. The cutscene is part of the game because the game tells us that it is. Games are organising structures whose meaning can be interpreted from the way in which its elements are organised and the relations it creates between things. The way in which that organising structure is created is informed at least partly by mythologies. Developers draw on their own models for understanding the world—or borrow different models, or negate models—in constructing how the gameworld operates, instantiating as virtuality a particular model of the world. In this way, games are also an organising structure for mythologies, sorting them into hierarchies and networks.

Mytholudics as an approach focuses on unpicking the way in which games are organised. Core to a mytholudic approach is to show what unspoken premises govern the way in which things within the game are put into relation with one another. What does the model of reality in the gameworld encourage us to predict? *Assassin's Creed* instantiates its gameworld in such a way that I can predict that each significant figure of history is affiliated with either the Assassins or the Templars. More basically, in *Call of Duty* I know that killing civilians will lead to negative consequences (a game over), while in *Grand Theft Auto* I can do so with little consequence. These different relations and the predictions they encourages us to make reveal what lies behind the organisation of the game. We can see what models of reality the game models are based on, influenced by, or reacting to, as well as what the game model might be feeding back into society.

A mytholudic approach attempts to isolate the mythologies at work in the organisation of elements within the game. This is ultimately an impossible task because of how blurred the boundaries are and how slippery mythologies are. Nonetheless, the attempt reveals a great deal of those hidden premises and structures. By seeking to analyse a mythology rather than any particular game element or kind of game element, we see how the game organises relations between any kind of elements. Indeed, what an *element* even is is in part determined by the way in which it is organised. For that I return to the mythic discourse analysis terminology of *integer*. Frog's description of the term is flexible: "a distinguishable unit (of whatever sort) ... an indicator that something is an integer is precisely the ability to talk about it as a unit" (2021a, p. 169). This may sound evasive, but it speaks to the fact that this method derives meaningful units *from* its object of study, rather than imposing concepts of units *on* it. With games, we derive *from* the game what *it* constitutes as minimally meaningful, and build up to motifs and themes from there. In one game, shooting a gun may be relatively meaningless in itself; in another, shooting a gun is a rare occasion charged with meaning.

When analysing the examples in this dissertation, this approach helped me to not overlook the basic, seemingly uninteresting parts of games. Whenever I did not know how to progress with an analysis, I would stop and map out my current observations in mythic discourse analysis markup. What integers have I identified? How do they relate to others? Are there common motifs that recur? This (sometimes tedious) process of trying to isolate the basic integers and map the relations between them would always lead to some new insight that I had overlooked. The results of this mapping do not always need to be displayed in the body of the work—as Frog notes, the markup in practice "often remains in the

background of studies or may be used in simplified form” (2021a, p. 170). But by laying out these most seemingly obvious aspects, one is forced to see them for what they are. And sometimes this means switching between viewing the game in stasis as an artefact and the game-as-played, thinking about what the player *does* or is guided to do through the inscribed forms of agency (Nguyen, 2020). The process of mythologisation encourages us to skip over those first steps of analysis, baking in certain premises and connections. Laying them out and isolating them helps to unmask the myth.

Mytholudics is also an approach that allows for both zooming in and out as well as for abstraction, both of which are well-suited for comparison. It can be used for the close reading of the minutest scene of gameplay, or higher-level types can be constructed to facilitate larger groupings. This is because of the relativity both of Barthes’ mythology as form rather than concept, and Frog’s integers as taking their meaning from the object of study rather than imposing them. A single *Call of Duty* protagonist can be analysed in detail, or all of them can be grouped together as *hero-victims* as the basic unit and compared to other broadly similar heroes throughout games, other media and history. In my experience over the course of writing the example analyses, this was freeing, providing a focused, coherent structure for an analysis that can range from the micro to the macro.

It should be restated though that this is a subjective process, an analysis produced from *my* position enmeshed in *these* mythologies at *this* moment in time. While I believe that analyses using this method on the same example would observe largely the same integers and motifs, they would to some extent be situated differently in relation to the mythic environment the player/interpreter inhabits. Different connections would be made, perhaps different lineages identified, and that is to be welcomed. To ‘conclude’ these analyses and these arguments is, to steal from Aarseth’s conclusion of *Cybertext*, “to impose a finality on them that I do not believe they have” (1997, p. 182).

So, does a mythological approach help us to understand how games make meaning? I hope that my analyses show the answer to be that it does. More interestingly, I hope the way in which the analyses have proceeded and my theorisation of myth as applied to games demonstrate how. Mythology understood as naturalised models for understanding the world and things in it can be applied to games in two primary ways: games *as* myth and games *through* myth.

Seeing games *as* myth is to see the game as an organising structure. The game is based on a model—literally a computational model—of a world, which forms the basis of the game-world’s virtual, simulatory nature (in contrast to most other media). This virtuality is in itself a form of myth actualised. By that I mean that a model of the world is constructed and *made true* within the virtual gameworld. In *Skyrim*, the blessings from the gods are literally, computationally real. They are not necessarily-incomplete models of a broader reality, the model *is* the reality. As such, the game has this inherent naturalising force. I must accept when playing *Skyrim* that different races truly do have different innate, essential qualities. Knowing that the gameworld is not the real world means that I do not necessarily carry this model with me once I put the controller down, but it does affect how I *relate* to the game and, as Bjørkelo (2020) outlines, these relations or resonances between gameworld and real world can be used as part of broader rhetorical strategies. While the computational actualisation

of racist mythologisations, for example, does not automatically instil those racist values in players, it nonetheless can be used to support and reinforce these myths in reality, as seen in right-wing players' embracing of *Skyrim*.

This model, this organising structure defines for itself what its minimally meaningful units are and puts them into relation with each other. These units may include acts of gameplay, visual symbols, spatial configurations, death and respawning, characters, and so on. Within this organising structure can be the inscribed modes of agency that Nguyen (2020) discusses, the spatial configurations of quests that Aarseth (2005) outlines, the performative acts Jayemanne (2017) describes, and so on. The point is by no means to supplant any of these theories. Rather, mytholudics is a way of examining the relations forged between these very different aspects as they are organised by the game.

If the Ship of Theseus represents how mythology works, remaining the same while always changing, then games offer us a view to how and why we are replacing the planks and plugging the holes in the ship today. For Barthes, myth "transforms history into nature" (1972/2009, p. 154), and in doing so it "*harmonizes* with the world, not as it is, but as it wants to create itself" (1972/2009, p. 184). Mythology is worldbuilding. By analysing the world that is created and the nature we are shown, we find the history, the world as it is. In the gap between the two—the world as it is and the mythical world—we find the values, the ideology, the politics, the impetus and the incentives behind why that otherworld was created in the way it has been.



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