

Infinite Heroes and Quests of Skyrim: Investigating the Role of Norse Mythology in the Longevity of Bethesda Game Studios' Video Game '*The Elder Scrolls V*'¹

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Abstract

This study examines the connections between narratives in video game genres, particularly action RPGs, and the processes of appropriation and circulation among communities, analyzing in depth the interaction dynamics between the lore narratives of "*The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*" and information shared inside Reddit forums. The study suggests that the Norse mythology in the video game *Skyrim* does not directly correlate with contemporary social conflicts. Instead, it suggests that socially relevant themes and ideologies may be attracted to different channels, such as less specific spaces. This aligns with the echo chamber model, where different themes correspond to different communicative and performative spaces. The Norse mythology serves as an open narrative infrastructure for the game's designers and players, supporting the construction of the possible world of the lore. However, the study does not show direct contamination effects on communities, suggesting that the lore may indirectly produce ideology on socially relevant issues.

Keywords

Norse mythology, Viking, Lore, MMPRG, Skyrim, Netnography

Introduction

The present work lies at the intersection of game studies, netnographic studies (Bartl, Kannan, and Stockinger 2016; Jeacle 2021), and

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considerations about the imaginary and processes of constructing social reality in relation to products of the digital cultural industry. Specifically, this contribution aims to investigate the existing relationships between the narratives—analysed as *lore*—of a particular video game genre, in this case, action RPGs (Role Playing Games), the processes of appropriation of narratives and symbolic content by players, and their circulation within the discursive dynamics of communities. The initial hypothesis posits that these narratives may act as catalysts for the activation of socially pertinent instances, in alignment with Jenkins' (2006) transmedia framework, Floridi's (2014) onlife practices, and the insights of Boccia Artieri et al. (2018) regarding the interconnections among social platforms, quotidian life, social interactions, and media consumption. The analysis will focus on the interaction dynamics between the lore narratives of the video game *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*—strongly inspired by Norse mythology—and the content published on the forums of three fan communities on the social network Reddit. To this end, a mixed-method approach will be used, involving a preliminary phase of investigation using a qualitative approach, a second phase of data gathering through quantitative research tools, utilizing the data analysis software available on the Communalytic platform², followed by a qualitative analysis phase, conducted using a netnographic (Jeacle 2021) and socio-semiotic approach.

Dominant Genres and Cross-Platform Trends in Console and PC Gaming

The most played video games are often distinguished by game-play dynamics and account management typical of *Role-Playing Games* (RPG) or *Massive Multiplayer Role-Playing Games* (MMRPG). Nearly all games of this genre are developed with a cross-platform logic and are also prepared for Virtual Reality (VR) gaming sessions via headsets. Among the most played titles in 2024 were *Hogwarts Legacy*, *Red Dead Redemption 2*, *Skull and Bones*, *Final Fantasy VII Rebirth*, *Marvel's Spider-Man 2*, *Star Wars Jedi: Survivor* and various titles from the *Call of Duty* series³.

It is more challenging, however, to estimate which MMRPGs are the most popular, although published rankings based on downloads, MAUs, and Daily Active Users (DAUs) reported by the production companies are fairly consistent. Among the most significant titles, we can cite: "World of Warcraft" (approximately 5-6M monthly players); "Final Fantasy 14" (daily players ranging from 300-400K and monthly players between

² <https://communalytic.org/>. See also Gruzd-Mai and Vahedi (2024).

³ [Best-selling video games - top markets - Statistics & Facts | Statista](#)

800K-1.2M); "Guild Wars 2" (daily players of 100-200K and monthly figures of 600K-800K); and "The Elder Scrolls Online" (40-50K daily and 150-200K monthly players).⁴

The cross-platform orientation of these products is not only highlighted during the development phase by production companies, but it is also clearly emphasized through the observation of consumption habits. These habits manifest themselves through the volume of online discussions—and the *hype*, meaning the enthusiasm related to the product—generated within the game software itself, on platforms dedicated to game distribution, such as Steam, and across various social platforms. Among these, those with a strong audio-visual focus, such as Twitch, YouTube, and TikTok, as well as communities on Discord, Reddit, Patreon, and even general social media platforms like X (Twitter) and Instagram, are particularly prominent.

User-generated content predominantly takes the form of textual discussions, exporting videos created by players themselves, reviews, guides, walkthroughs, comments, bug abuse reports, publication of mods or fan art, etc. Alongside this more surface-level activity, there is also a more underground dimension, where hacked versions of the game, illicit mods, tricks, and cracks are primarily published.

It is evident, even from this brief overview of both the global market and the production and consumption processes, that some inferences can be drawn. On the one hand, these products are characterized by strong seriality—a typical feature of cultural industry products (Artieri 2023; Eco 1964)—yet each one is also individually distinguished by its own narrative setting. In video games, seriality manifests not only through the recurring narrative patterns but also in the interaction practices between the user and the product. In video games, the player is induced by the game itself to establish an inextricable physical symbiosis with consumption, to collaborate with the characters' actions and the storyline, and to contribute to the development of the game itself.

The recurring patterns also manifest through serial practices—almost *ritualistic*—that open to specific innovations, differing from one video game to another. Similarly, even the settings, though characterized by general recurrences, are individually distinguished by specific innovations. Seriality, in turn, allows the aggregation of products into specific clusters, which are the video game genres—much like all other products of the entertainment industry. The common genres characterizing these products can, however, pertain both to gameplay practices—such as simulators, Real Time Strategy Games (RTS), or,

⁴ <https://eightify.app/media/most-popular-mmorpgs-in-2023-by-player-count-guild-wars-2-el#top-mmorpgs-by-player-count>

indeed, MMRPGs—and to the narrative genres of lore—fantasy, historical, modern, cyberpunk, etc.

Consider, for instance, three of the titles referenced thus far: 1) *Hogwarts Legacy*; 2) *Star Wars Jedi: Survivor*; and 3) any game from the *Call of Duty* series. The first is clearly inspired by the literature and cinematography related to the *Harry Potter* fantasy series made popular by British author J. K. Rowling, cantered on the existence of a global society of wizards that lives parallel to the human world, though largely hidden from it; the second draws on the endless narratives of the *Star Wars* sci-fi series, created by director and writer George Lucas, based on the countless stories that occurred "a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away"; the third is inspired by the real history of World War II and the subsequent events of the Cold War, up to the most recent contemporary conflicts, using references to real historical figures, as well as faithful reproductions of weapons, uniforms, military tactics, and actual combat vehicles. While the first—*Hogwarts Legacy*—can be classified under the genre of MMRPGs, the second belongs to the genre of Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA), and the third can be defined as a Multiplayer Online First-Person Shooter (MOFPS). Each of these different genres corresponds to different dynamics of user interaction, or different serialities of interaction and product appropriation, allowing the consumer the reassuring familiarity of known *rituals*—just as occurs with the consumption of cinema or television.

What is important to emphasize, however, is that all three titles mentioned are characterized by their own unique and recognizable narrative world, which is referred to as *lore*. It is therefore necessary to delve deeper into the concept of *lore* and explain why it is much more effective than the traditional concept of *narrative* or *story* as a conceptual framework for studying the processes of appropriation of a cultural product.

The Evolution and Significance of Lore in Role-Playing Games

The term "lore," originating from the Old English "lar," signifying "teaching" or "knowledge," denotes a compilation of knowledge, narratives, myths, or traditions linked to a specific culture or social group. This idea has historically pertained to folklore, with the suffix "lore" denoting the collection of oral histories, legends, and myths that underpin a community's culture and identity.

In the 1970s and 1980s, with the rise of role-playing games (RPGs) like "Dungeons & Dragons" (D&D) and other similar products characterized by live oral role-playing by players, as well as resulting in non-linear narratives, the term "lore" began to be used to describe the knowledge and internal history of these fantasy worlds. In D&D, for example, "lore" includes the mythology of the game world, stories of

deities, the history of races and places, and other information that provides depth and coherence to the narrative world.

With the advent of electronic media and the concurrent intensification of processes typical of secondary orality (Ong 1982), the term "lore" became better suited than others to describe the dynamics of consuming non-linear narratives, which, especially after the spread of Hypertext Markup Language (HTML), have become the predominant forms of storytelling and knowledge transmission on the planet.

With the spread of video games in the 1990s, especially role-playing (RPG) and adventure games—not to mention the simultaneous development of Multi-User-Dungeons (MUDs) like *Ultima Online*, precursors to contemporary MMRPGs—the term "lore" was adopted to refer to the narrative background of these virtual worlds. In game series like *The Elder Scrolls* and *Final Fantasy*, lore is essential, offering players a complex story that enriches the gaming experience and promotes creativity through recursion, fundamental to the concepts of seriality (Eco 1964). In these instances, lore includes not only the main storyline but also ancillary information, accounts of secondary characters, myths, stories, and more content that create a cohesive narrative universe, so enriching the immersive and captivating nature of the gaming experience. The advent of serial media and transmedia narratives has considerably expanded the concept of "lore." Television series like *Lost* or *Game of Thrones*, not to mention franchises like *Star Wars* or *The Marvel Cinematic Universe*, adopted an approach similar to that of role-playing games and video games. In these products, lore includes not only the main plot but also the backstories of characters, the traditions of different worlds, and details that can be explored through different media, such as books, movies, comics, and websites. Scholars like Henry Jenkins (2006) and Janet Murray (1997) have extensively analyzed this topic via the lens of transmedia, highlighting the importance of legend cultivation and expansion for audience engagement and participation. Other researchers, such as Espen Aarseth (1997) and Jesper Juul (2005), have analyzed the importance of lore in interactive media, emphasizing its vital function in creating narrative settings that need active audience engagement. In this context, lore is not merely an additional element but a central component that enriches over time according to a non-linear narrative logic and defines the identity and coherence of a narrative universe, operating as a network of meanings that crosses different forms of media.

The lore of a video game, especially serial ones, includes the biographies of the main characters, those of user-created and managed characters, chronicles of wars and battles, the histories of nations and cities, as well as stories developed by individual characters and those generated and developed by communities. Specifically, communities are responsible for writing *encyclopaedias* (or wikis) of their respective

virtual worlds, such as those related to the *Baldur's Gate*⁵ or *Fallout*⁶ video game "sagas."

The lore of a video game encompasses the myths and legends of the game's *possible world* (Eco, 1979), explaining the origin of the world itself and its inhabitants, including stories of legendary heroes, deities, and mythical creatures. Consequently, it forms the foundation for the construction of the traditions and culture of the narrative universe; it details the customs, religions, magical practices, and cultures of the various races and factions within the game, exploring art, music, literature, and other forms of cultural expression. Lore also establishes the boundaries for geography and setting, describing the physical world of the game, including maps of continents, cities, villages, forests, deserts, and other significant locations, providing information on the landscapes, climates, and natural features of the game world. By describing the peculiarities of the world, lore is also responsible for depicting the human geography of the game, establishing details of the physical characteristics and unique abilities of the various races and characters, as well as their different magical abilities, features, traditions, cultures, histories, and social norms, while also providing information on key characters and their personal stories.

In addition to this:

- modding processes allow users to create original content that contributes new tales, characters, and environments to the game, so significantly enriching the narrative universe and offering innovative gaming experiences;
- during events and specialized role-playing sessions, players can create new narratives and legends within the game world, which often become woven into the cultural fabric of the player community.

The contact between developers and the player community in video games is augmented by content production, narrative choices, community discussions, modding, and role-playing activities, which may influence the game's future growth.

Finally, it is necessary to add that, according to the model of narrative *possible worlds* developed by Umberto Eco (1979) and further enriched by Paolo Jedlowski's (2022) concept of *narrating communities*, every lore, no matter how fantastical it may be, to strengthen its internal

⁵ <https://bg3.wiki/>

⁶ https://fallout.wiki/wiki/Fallout_Wiki

coherence, necessarily draws from deep, sedimented narratives from outside the product's narrative context, primarily from myths.

Mythologies, due to their archetypal nature, serve as general narrative matrices that complete and further enhance the coherence of a lore designed for a global market and, therefore, potentially capable of resonating with any narrating community. This is why, behind many lores of entertainment industry products, one can discern the plots of religions, cosmogonies, pantheons, and legends—as well as real historical events—that have permeated every era and every construction of social reality throughout human history. Consider successful products like the *Assassin's Creed* video game series, produced by Ubisoft, which draws indiscriminately from Muslim, Christian, Egyptian, or Norse mythology, or reinterprets historical memories of the Crusades, Viking civilizations, or the American and French revolutions. It is therefore unsurprising to see the functional use of Norse mythology in the construction of the lore for a video game product like *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, which significantly contributes to the game's narrative coherence.

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim

The specific focus of this research will be the analysis of the interaction between communities and the lore of the video game *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. Produced in 2011 by Bethesda Game Studios and having achieved over 60 million sales to date, the game *Skyrim* belongs to the single-player RPG genre, as it does not natively include any online game-play mode. *Skyrim*, the fifth installment in *The Elder Scrolls* series, is situated in the northern expanse of the fictional continent of *Tamriel*, inhabited by the resilient *Nord people* and administered by the *Empire*. The game's visual appeal reflects medieval Scandinavia, showcasing settings, characters, artifacts, culture, and traditions that incorporate Norse mythology.

Skyrim has emerged as a focal point for the development of one of the most extensive and enduring online communities in the history of the RPG video game genre. Throughout the narrative, the engagement between the player and the storyline transpires in first-person shooter mode. Since the inaugural edition in the series—*The Elder Scrolls: Arena* in 1994—Bethesda has established a distinctive approach to game-play and narrative, marked by several notable characteristics:

- The use of realistic medieval settings and global civilization mythologies, yet functional for the creation of an original fantasy world.
- A first-person game-play mode for interaction between the player and the game world, aimed at creating the most evocative possible simulation of reality.

- A narrative structure that can be described as *pseudo-non-linear*, featuring a main plot while allowing the user to freely explore the game world—an "open world"—and encounter numerous quests, many of which are recursively generated by the game's algorithm.
- A character growth and improvement system based on the actual actions performed in the game rather than the successful completion of individual quests, designed so that the user can "train" or "level up" their character before undertaking the most dangerous quests.
- A free ethical interpretation of one's character, capable of adopting both virtuous and ethically questionable behaviors, resulting in rewards or punishments depending on their conduct toward specific characters in the game world (an example of this ethically eclectic system is the character's ability to join certain guilds, such as warriors, thieves, or assassins, undertaking tasks that can alternately allow or prevent access to the higher levels of the hierarchies).

Let's begin by noting how Norse mythology has been—and continues to be—a source of inspiration for the lore of numerous successful video game products. Among them, we can mention:

- *God of War* (2018), by Santa Monica Studio & Sony Interactive Entertainment. 11 million sales.
- *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (2017), by Ninja Theory. 1 million sales.
- *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* (2020), by Ubisoft. 20 million sales.
- *Jotun* (2015), by Thunder Lotus Games. 350,000 sales.

On the other hand, it is also necessary to note how the success of Norse mythology in constructing the lore of numerous video games—whether fantasy or realistic—can be attributed to a particular historical phase favorable to the use of this mythology for the creation of cultural products, from Marvel's historical comic series *Thor* to more recent TV series like *Vikings*, just to name a few examples.

Determining the causes of this achievement is challenging and not the main emphasis of this work. Nonetheless, we can endeavor to delineate certain theories that may provide a foundation for subsequent research:

- The modern fantasy genre mostly derives its inspiration from the literary world established by British author J. R. R. Tolkien throughout the 1930s to 1950s. Strongly inspired by Norse mythology, the universe created by Tolkien is symbiotic with the mythological one and, consequently, already potentially introduces numerous elements consistent with the themes of ancient Scandinavian religion, such as cosmology, polytheism, the

coexistence of various anthropomorphic races within the same world, warrior heroism as a path to eternal glory, and so on.

- Norse mythology is consistent with the gamification processes typical of contemporary society. The themes that enrich the vicissitudes of the Norse pantheon—at least the most famous ones, such as the omnipresence of war, dualism, or the inevitability of the end—resonate coherently with the model of the interactive hero's journey, which has expanded from gaming practices to include social media, institutional channels, education, and many other aspects of digitized daily life.
- The characters of Norse mythology, belonging to a polytheistic pantheon, with their many flaws, exaggerated humanity, and ethical eclecticism—a trait similar to the gods and characters of Greek mythology—are highly relatable to the diverse global youth audience of today.
- Norse mythology features a significant diversity of characters, motivations, and themes (consider, for instance, the cross-cultural appeal of characters like Loki, Freyja, or Odin). Moreover, it is populated by various and heterogeneous ethnic groups and races that coexist or compete with one another. Consequently, this melting pot is well-suited to the increasingly dominant contemporary culture focused on cross-cultural issues (such as gender and racial equality).

Skryim uses the so-called *draconic alphabet*, derived from the Elder Futhark, the archaic runic script, while the magical runes in the game function as traps, reminiscent of the runic magic in Norse folklore. Dragons had considerable symbolic significance, represented as gigantic flying reptiles that express devastation and chaos, yet also wisdom and strength, mirroring the fears, beliefs, and values of ancient Scandinavian nations. The fusion of fantasy and human history has been further examined by users via the development of mods—community-created custom changes to the game—drawing on more comprehensive historical texts or artifacts housed in medieval history museums. An exemplary case to clarify the interaction between legendary narratives and the game's mythology is the analysis of a particular quest named "The Chief of Thirsk Hall." This quest, categorized as a secondary mission and thus non-essential for the progression of the primary narrative, occurs underground, where a tribe of *Riekling*, anthropomorphic beings influenced by the mythical *Jötnar* of Norse lore, solicits the protagonist's alliance to vanquish a human village that jeopardizes their existence. Upon completing the quest—which involves the extermination of the entire human population of a nearby small village, as well as the killing of the *Riekling* tribe's chief—the game's protagonist will gain the valuable

alliance of the tribe, though this may result in being declared an outlaw by the authorities of other settlements.

The longevity of the game *Skyrim*, as mentioned, represents a sort of anomaly in the landscape of single episodes in RPG series, especially those that lack native online modes. Certainly, supported by the graphic design and technical architecture of the software, which has managed to "stay relevant" over the years despite the subsequent release of numerous competing titles, it likely owes much to the appeal of the fantasy universe of the entire *The Elder Scrolls* series. The game has garnered significant support from prominent online groups, particularly on Reddit, where players have participated in collaborative efforts to provide ideas, theories, and personal interpretations. The modding community has significantly improved the gaming experience by creating modifications that feature more multiplayer modes and unofficial game versions. From this viewpoint, modding has functioned as a genuine elixir of life, a wellspring of perpetual vitality for a software product that has seen ongoing regeneration, akin to an olive tree that rejuvenates from its own roots over millennia, so simulating immortality. It is no coincidence that modding has been consistently supported by Bethesda, the production company, which realized that it provided unparalleled longevity to a product that, in 2024, celebrates its twelfth anniversary.

In addition to being the beating heart of modding activity, the communities have also consistently organized events and challenges over the years, helping to maintain interest in the game.

Dynamics of Community Interaction

We can therefore attempt to represent how communities relate to and interact with the game's lore through a perspective focused on the proximity or distance of user-initiated processes from the narrative epicenter.

First and foremost, during the observation, it was possible to detect a kind of double tension—centripetal and centrifugal—emanating from a narrative gravitational center, which we can define as the "World (& Rules) of the Game," and an outer ring, almost comparable to an asteroid belt, formed by the set of actions and processes initiated by users, aggregated in the form of a community, which can be defined as the "Meta-World (& Meta-Rules) Beyond the Game."

In the innermost pole—as depicted in *Figure 1*—we have the true gravitational center of the lore, which we define as the "in-game" sphere, where interactions between players, as well as those between players and storytellers/programmers, occur according to the codes of the game's lore itself. Consequently, in this dimension, it is necessary to talk about interaction between characters and non-playable characters (NPCs), rather than between players.

Next, we have a subsequent boundary layer, which we can define as "off-game," where the game's flow is, let's say, suspended in a sort of "pause" mode. Typically, interactions between players and storytellers in this more internal boundary dimension are expressed in chats and on channels provided by the game itself. Metaphorically, we can say that the pause represents the moment when players *look up from the table* and look at each other, either to ask for clarification about something that happened in the game or simply to see if everyone agrees to take a break or introduce changes to the story. The lore—and the software code through which it is technically constructed—still represents the predominant context guiding the codes of conversation in this phase of the game. Consequently, in this dimension, interactions can occur both between characters and players, although they are symbiotic with each other. In the "off-game" dimension, it is usually not possible to interact with NPCs unless interaction with a programmer, moderator, or storyteller within the game is allowed. It is in this dimension that the dual natures of characters/players begin to express themselves, which we can try to categorize as skilled, novice, expert, nerd, hacker, cheater, cracker, etc.

Moving to the outermost zone—namely the "Meta-World (& Meta-Rules) Beyond the Game"—we enter the next boundary layer, which can be defined as "out-of-the-game." This sphere includes all discussions expressed on platforms and channels external to the game but still indissolubly connected to it. This encompasses all game-related social communities present on social platforms, as well as the series of websites related to the game. This sphere is thus the most hypertrophic in quantitative terms of content produced, even though it uses the lore as the narrative epicenter. The game world is more distant, the narrative epicenter of the lore is weaker, and it is viewed from the outside, though still on a satellite constantly orbiting around it. Interactions are thus expressed between players, storytellers, programmers, producers, fans, etc., and no longer necessarily between characters, as discussions or content publication is open to users who may not necessarily be players.

The outermost layer from the "in-game" dimension can finally be defined as "beyond-the-game." It is situated far enough from the primary gravitational pull of the lore to express antithetical narrative tensions, though not so far as to completely lose the attractive force and definitively migrate to other lores. However, this distance allows for the generation of anti-discourses that attempt to subvert and hack the lore itself, even through tampering with the game's code. It is important to specify, however, that this form of anti-lore is indissolubly dependent on the lore to maintain its own coherence. Consequently, it is not simply an alternative but can assume an antithetical stance. The channels where the anti-dimension "beyond-the-game" is expressed are usually alternative social channels to the "institutional" ones—primarily search

engines for hacked material, such as "The Pirate Bay," fringe social media platforms like Telegram, and, of course, real-life chatting.

The proximity or distance from the "in-game" gravitational center influences the nature of what is produced by—and within—communities. Gradually, these communities' express actions and content that can be functional to reinforce the hegemonic coherence of the lore, exploit it, or tamper with it, even risking its destruction. Consequently, we gradually see: guides, walkthroughs, tips, solutions, reviews, reports of bug abuse, creation of mods, complaints, protests, tricks, cheats, cracks, hacked versions of the game, shitstorms, boycotts, etc.

Similarly, boycotts or actions aimed at tampering with game servers—such as the so-called "corrupted blood" incident in *World of Warcraft* (Giungato and Miggiano 2022)—can stem from the introduction of alternative or antithetical portions of lore to the game—such as the ideology of free software, gender equality, or mods that completely transform the game by setting it in ancient Rome—in order to modify or tamper with the game's lore itself.

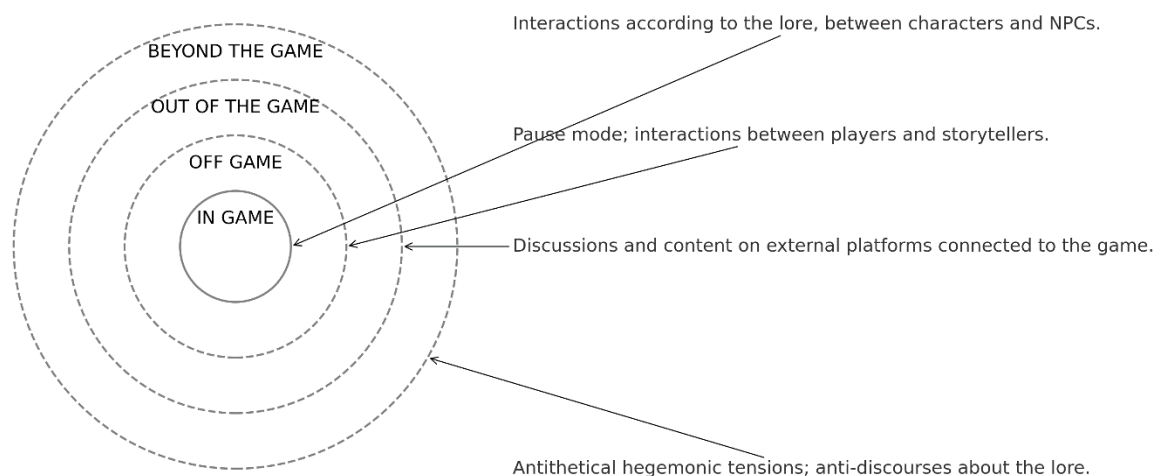


Figure 1: Representation of communities in relation to the game lore and its distance from the narrative epicenter

Now, it can sometimes happen that, in the process of negotiation and appropriation between the product and users, a portion of the video game's lore is used to "hack" or "tamper with" discourses that, apparently, are completely unrelated to the game itself, while at the same time holding significant social relevance. This is the case, for example, when a cultural product is used as a trigger for social causes or as an emblem of a movement—think of the role played by films like *Apocalypse Now* by Francis Ford Coppola or *The Deer Hunter* by Michael Cimino in anti-war discourses in the 1980s, or by songs like *Redemption Song* by Bob Marley or *Clandestino* by Manu Chao for post-colonial or anti-

globalization movements. It is therefore conceivable that, in the same way, mass-market video game products can also trigger such dynamics of interaction between lore and social causes.

Beyond Skyrim(?)

In particular, the hypothesis that the lore related to medieval Scandinavia and Norse mythology in the video game *Skyrim* may have established connections with other sociocultural contexts has been the focus of various studies over the years. Elisabeth Cooper (2016) completed a PhD research at the University of Leeds entitled "Fantasies of the North: Medievalism and Identity in *Skyrim*." Her research posits that the medieval and Nordic milieu of *Skyrim* aligns with the overarching trend of modern cultural industry outputs employing such narrative frameworks to reinforce the identity of Western white civilization, so serving as conduits for conservative goals.

Even more striking is Bjørkelo's (2020) study, which examines a sample of discussions on the white supremacist forum *Stormfront* related to *Skyrim*. The research shows how, in this context, the game's lore is embedded in the group's identity dynamics, providing narrative support for the online community's agenda, which sees the struggle for the liberation of the oppressed *Nord people* against the cosmopolitan, multiethnic, and multiracial *Empire of Cyrodiil* as a metaphor for their own cause.

An interesting and original approach is presented by Melnic (2018), who explores the possibility that, rather than being products aimed at reenacting the past, medieval video games or other similar transmedia products should be considered as contributions to the construction of a postmodern epic that uses the past as an aesthetic surface.

The work of McRae, Bernard, and Cranefield (2016) focuses on a sort of revolt that occurred within the *Skyrim* community on the Steam platform. On April 24, 2015, Steam and Bethesda announced that the tool for creating and distributing mods would be monetized, with a system that would allocate 25% of the revenue from a mod's sale to the modder (i.e., the creator), 30% to Steam, and the remaining 45% to Bethesda. The community's revolt manifested in various forms, including boycotting the platform and the production company, creating free mods that populated the game with fake Bethesda lawyers asking players for money, clogging the game support lines, and a sort of strike by mod creators. Despite initial resistance, Bethesda and *Skyrim* chose not to monetize user-generated mods, launching the "Creation Club" in 2017. This platform utilizes *Skyrim*'s software, allowing users to acquire additional content from Bethesda and third-party developers, including modders. Although the Creation Club was designed to offer high-quality, officially approved content, it received considerable criticism from gaming communities. Many users believed it was a disguised form of monetization, exploiting

the creative work of modders under the guise of an additional service. Notwithstanding the concerns, the Creation Club remains operational and is a prominent topic of debate within modding groups, where many contend that modifications ought to be free and universally available.

Hawreliak (2013) questions whether the representation of the hero, such as the hero of *Skyrim*, who can embrace and lead one of the faction's causes to victory, might contribute to the so-called rhetoric of immortality of the hero archetype among contemporary young users, a function once fulfilled by the myths of the past, from which 20th-century propaganda heavily drew. Hirvonen's (2017) research, based on a sample of mod creators, indicates that the principal motivation for making and utilizing mods is exclusively aesthetic, devoid of any socio-cultural considerations. Finally, Drislane (2021) examined the potential that the excessive creation of mods for *Skyrim* may obscure political and social agendas that coexist and interact within the shared mythos. Drislane's findings indicate that the purpose of mods is exclusively to augment the game and enhance the overall enjoyment of game-play. All of this allows us to reflect on the top-down interaction between authority, the game, and the audience.

As can be seen from this brief overview, there is no consensus on the directions taken by the interaction between video game lore and social appropriation processes.

Methodology

For the purposes of this research, it was considered useful to proceed in three different phases:

1. In-Depth Interviews: A series of in-depth interviews were conducted with some expert players/researchers of the video game residing in Italy. The purpose of this preliminary phase of listening and processing the information gathered was twofold: first, to identify the main interpretative categories through which to investigate the interaction between communities and lore—as outlined in the previous paragraph; and second, to gain a deep insight into the lore of the video game *Skyrim*. Additionally, the dialogue with expert players, both of the game in question and of the broader field of game studies, allowed for the identification of some key interpretative elements useful for clarifying the parameters of the relationship between lore and mythology.
2. The inquiry employed a quantitative methodology utilizing the Communal analytic platform to examine discussions inside three pertinent subreddits: r/skyrim, r/skyrimmods, and r/teslore, which were recognized in phase 1. The analysis focused on selecting significant keywords related both to Norse mythology and to particularly relevant and "hot" social themes such as climate change, the war in Ukraine, racism, and gender equality. For this

phase of identifying the most relevant thematic keywords, it was also useful to utilize the ChatGPT 4.0 search algorithm, which provided a range of potential keywords for each specific theme, which were subsequently further refined. Using the Reddit API provided by Communalytic, relevant co-occurrences were searched for within the time frame of 2012-2020, as well as semantic clouds and possible sentiment polarizations within the discussions. This phase also made it possible to investigate the presence of any emerging discursive patterns to determine whether there was any form of influence of these social themes within the online communities analyzed.

3. Qualitative and Netnographic Approach: The third phase was dedicated to a more qualitative and netnographic approach to further analyze the dynamics of the Reddit online communities related to *Skyrim*. This phase began with a new round of interviews with the research group from phase 1—who were presented with the partial results from phase 2 and provided their feedback—and then moved on to direct gameplay experience through installation via the Steam platform, followed by the use of the "Special Edition" of *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, published by Bethesda in 2016 as a remastered and graphically updated version for the latest graphics cards, of the original 2011 game version. Subsequently, phase 3 involved a more in-depth direct observation of the r/skyrim subreddit, using the Reddit platform's search engine to identify and analyze the most relevant and discussed posts (classified according to the "top" and "hot" parameters), in which some of the previously identified keywords appeared—such as "Thor," "Odin," "Freyja," "Vikings," and "Ragnarök"—as well as those related to socially relevant themes such as "Climate Change", "Global Warming", or "Sustainability". The goal was to investigate possible correlations between elements of mythology and other keywords related to the same socially relevant themes explored in phase 2. Finally, a textual analysis of the most significant documents that emerged during the research was conducted, with the objective of interpreting the dominant meanings and narratives within the community, in relation to how Norse mythology is integrated and represented in the game and in interactions among players.

Results and discussion

The preliminary phase of the research, which involved exploring the interpretative categories and main themes to investigate—particularly the relationship between the lore of the video game *Skyrim*, Norse mythology, and certain sensitive social issues such as climate change, the war in Ukraine, or gender equality—through qualitative interviews, was certainly crucial for the subsequent steps of the research. This phase

allowed for a better understanding of the depth and versatility of the concept of lore compared to that of storytelling and inspired the construction of a framework for the relationship between communities and lore, as seen in *Figure 1*. Allowing the game *to speak* through the direct, face-to-face accounts of experienced players in the field of game studies is consistent with the deeply performative nature of video game consumption, where physical interpretation is as emphasized as personal involvement, due to the technical nature of interaction with the consumer product.

Conversely, Phase 2 yielded no noteworthy results; yet, a meticulous analysis reveals that this absence of significance may itself constitute a compelling consequence. The examination of the keywords did not uncover any notable co-occurrences between Norse mythology and the prevalent societal themes in the conversations inside the *Skyrim* groups. The research analyzed Norse mythology within a game and user-generated content, uncovering numerous instances. Nevertheless, keywords pertaining to climate change, gender equality, racism, and the Russia-Ukraine war produced negligible results, refuting the first notion of a correlation between Norse mythology and socioeconomic difficulties. The inquiry persisted in examining the primary subreddit from 2012 to 2023. In this case, the results appeared more relevant, though they stem from the researcher's direct interpretation and, therefore, should be considered necessarily partial.

Despite these limitations, direct observation of the communities revealed that Norse mythology primarily serves as a narrative infrastructure for the world of *Skyrim*. Players seem to view this mythology as an enhancement of their gaming experience, while broader social issues do not seem to emerge significantly in the discussions. The analysis showed that Norse mythology indeed functions as a mere narrative infrastructure for the construction of the game's world and does not seem to play any direct role concerning the lore, at least according to the channels of the community considered. This purely pragmatic function is particularly evident in the forum specifically dedicated to modders (r/skyrimmods), where users do not engage in evident or direct conversations centered on socially relevant themes related to mythology. Instead, Norse mythology appears more as an aesthetic pretext, an element of visual fascination, aiming for greater realism in the interaction between the player and the game, and it never seems to take on the characteristics of an ideology. From this perspective, all channels appear almost completely de-ideologized, to the point where one might wonder whether the moderators played a significant role in this process. In any case, whether this absence is due to the forum users' disinterest in "hot" social topics or whether it results from some "censoring" action by the subreddit moderators, the fact remains that there does not seem to be any significant direct intermingling between lore and ideologies within

the forums examined. This leads to the deduction that lore, rooted in mythological or archetypal narratives, does not appear to directly trigger instances related to socially relevant themes, at least with the tools used and on the channels considered. However, at the same time, it is significant to note that such themes *do not appear at all* in a relevant manner on the same channels. This could suggest that these themes are practiced and developed elsewhere, in other discussion spaces—on other *stages*, we might say with Goffman (1959)—and that the community spontaneously opts not to introduce them into the dynamics of discourse development in the forum.

It should also be noted that phase 2 of the analysis—the one conducted using quantitative research tools—may have been flawed by some factors. First, selecting posts via API, even though Commanalytic provides the scientific community with the details of its algorithm, always involves some level of unpredictability, at least in individual studies conducted by a single computing device and a single user. In fact, information gathering through Social Network Analysis always relies on statistical frequency measurement. Moreover, as highlighted elsewhere (Yousefi Nooraie et al. 2020), merely detecting the frequency and correlations of keywords, especially when not conducted on big data and not accompanied by an in-depth qualitative research phase, does not allow for the construction of deep and complex interpretations of social dynamics, leaving us with the illusion of the supremacy of *data* over *understanding*.

Conclusions

If the quantitative data did not provide a direct confirmation of the hypothesis, does this necessarily imply a non-correlation between the themes of Norse mythology contained in the lore of the video game *Skyrim* and some of the most relevant issues of contemporary social conflicts? On the whole, we might say no. We could simply hypothesize that socially relevant themes—as well as *ideologies* (see Van Dijk 2000)—might be attracted to different channels, to less specific and more distant spaces from the center of gravity of the video game's lore. On the other hand, this also aligns with the *echo chamber* model, where different themes correspond to different communicative and performative spaces (Quattrociocchi and Vicini 2016).

In conclusion, the investigation seems to highlight how Norse mythology in the video game *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* serves merely as a protean (i.e., open) narrative infrastructure for the coherent construction of the *possible world* of the lore (see Eco 1979), both for the game's designers and for the players. Moreover, although contemporary fantasy narratives are based on Tolkien's 20th-century reinterpretation, inspired by Norse mythology, their various evolutions throughout the 20th century and up to now have always positioned themselves as *open*

texts (see Eco 1962) to endless other contaminations and influences. This is how fantasy literature has been able to support the construction of the lore of countless transmedia "sagas" and serials—whether in cinema or video games—diversely inspired by a wide range of mythologies. In turn, fantasy mythology has served and continues to serve as an ideological support for the processes of contemporary gamification, which is the underlying mechanism of the digital cultural industry.

However, within the limits of the case examined and the tools used, this does not seem to produce direct contamination effects on the communities, at least on the specific channels related to the video game. In other words, we could say that the lore does not seem to directly produce *ideology* on socially relevant issues, although it cannot be ruled out that such influence might manifest indirectly—the gamification process itself, after all, could be considered an indirect effect. We can, therefore, reasonably suppose that when—and if—this occurs, users might migrate to other channels or social media platforms, as has been observed in other cases and processes (Quattrociocchi and Vicini 2023).

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