Resisting Toxic Masculinity in God of War

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of non-hegemonic masculinities presented by the characters within the video game series *God of War*'s Norse saga (2018 and 2022). Specific reference has been made regarding how characters have been adapted to represent wider groups of masculinity than has previously been present within the franchise, exemplified through the primary protagonists of the games, Kratos and Atreus. The paper argues for the presence of hybrid masculinities and queer and queer coded representation within the games through narrative, characters and themes to demonstrate a progressive view of non-hegemonic masculinity.

Utilising textual analysis of the *God of War* series this paper references several case studies, exploring specific instance from the series, arguing for the presence of this representation, promoting ideals of acceptance of traditionally othered groups of non-hegemonic masculinities and queer communities. *God of War* will be argued to represent non-hegemonic masculine communities through explicit and subtextual representations with a desire to address Santa Monica Studios' prior depictions of masculinity and embed messages of empathy and compassion in the wider gaming community.

Contents

"In the direction of deer."

Kratos.

Introduction

Norse mythology, which is predominantly no longer practised, continues to be used as a source material in media products despite a lack of traditional widespread religious worship. From huge international blockbusters, like the Marvel Cinematic Universe franchise, to thought provoking independent video games like *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (2017), the mythology's characters and tales have inspired media creators throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. These products frequently demonstrate interesting adaptations of the myths and characters that explore beyond the original tales. This paper discusses how one such example, *God of War*, presents an adaptation that expands upon the myths, demonstrating how media practitioners are able to use Norse mythology to craft stories that reflect their issues related to their contemporary culture. In the example of *God of War* these issues are reflected through the representation of masculinity.

God of War (2018) and its sequel *God of War Ragnarök* (2022) are part of the larger *God of War* video game franchise produced by Santa Monica Studios as a series of PlayStation based console exclusives. The franchise explores various mythologies across its nine video games, with the two chosen for study, dubbed the Norse era, being eight and nine respectively. Kratos, *the* god of war, acts as the protagonist and avatar for the series and whose characterisation in the previous seven main series games (dubbed the Greek era) has been argued to be presented as a one-note vengeance monster and an archetypal representation of toxic masculinity (Conway, 2020, p943).

The first seven games explored Greek mythology with Kratos, the son of Zeus, enacting his murderous revenge for the loss of his family upon the Greek pantheon. The series was incredibly popular with a new entry, collection or remaster being released on a variety of PlayStation based platforms almost every year between 2005 and 2015 (2006 was the only year not to feature a release). Despite its popularity by the release of the seventh games in the series, *Ascension*, the series' critical reception was waning. *Ascension*, the final new instalment to the franchise prior to 2018 (ignoring rereleases and remasters) suffered from many reviewers referencing that they felt the series had become stale, providing players with "the same thing we've played countless times before" (Simmons, 2013). *Ascension* also suffered from controversy, highlighted by games critic Adam Sessler in 2013, linked to its female representation culminating in the public scrutiny placed on the unlockable PlayStation Trophy "Bros before Hos" that players are awarded with after Kratos violently kills a leading female antagonist of the game. These compounding issues led to the decision for the soft reboot of the franchise in 2018 (Redmond, 2022).

This reboot arguably presents Kratos as a more nuanced and developed version of the character who is now paired with a partner, his young son Atreus (an adaptation of Norse God of Mischief, Loki). The reveal of Atreus, and his relationship with Kratos, was announced at the *2016 E3* conference (PlayStation, 2016), where a brief gameplay trailer was presented and established how both characters were dealing with the grief of losing their family matriarch. This father-son relationship explores a more interesting approach to parenthood than what may have been expected from the series and from a representation of the hyper-masculine ideology of the Norse culture. This led to the approach to this thesis, exploring how Kratos and Atreus are represented within the game and present versions of masculinity that can be considered outside the hegemonic norm. Kratos and Atreus/Loki's adaptations will be discussed in relation to how parenthood, godhood and queer themes highlight representations of masculinity within *God of War*'s Norse era.

Methodology

2018's *God of War* and its 2022 sequel features a narrative that openly defies much of how the series had previously presented its characters and their motivations in prior entries in the series. This change in character and narrative focus provided context regarding how the Norse era can be argued to differ from a more traditional direct adaptation of the mythology and how that in turn provides commentary on masculinity. To explore this, textual analysis was employed to explore how masculinity is presented through the adaptations present and the games' larger representation of its characters.

The textual analysis utilised within this study was informed by existing discussions related to textual analysis frameworks, such as that of Elfriede Fürsich. In their 2009 discussion "In Defense of Textual Analysis" Fürsich references the significance of textual analysis and its presence as a "distinctive discursive moment between encoding and decoding" (p238). Fürsich continues to highlight how textual analysis should explore beyond the intentions of the author or even hegemonic audience interpretations. Instead, they argue, the reader should analyse a text's "ambiguities, unresolved dichotomies or contradictions" (p245) and argue for wider interpretations beyond the hegemonic. Fürsich's approach is evident within this thesis as it explores the reading of non-traditional and non-hegemonic representations of masculinity and queer reading of characters that may traditionally be considered heterosexual.

Due to the textual analysis present in this paper some topics discussed will explore interpretive analysis, referencing interpreted meaning observed in the text, potentially in contrast to the intentions of the original artist or artists constructing said text. The inclusion of this interpretive analysis can be validated through concepts presented in Barthes' exploration of the "Death of the

Author". The essay (discussed here from the 1977 essay collection *Image Music Text*) discusses how a text's meaning is generated by its audience, rather than the author and their original intentions. In the essay's opening Barthes' uses the example of Balzac's novella *Sarrasine* to contextualise the theory. Despite the focus on literature Barthes' approach can, arguably, be applied to any art including video game texts such as the topic of this discussion. Barthes argues how only considering the author's intentions limits the text, providing a single interpretation of its content and "close[s] the writing" (p147). Instead, he suggests, once a text is published the reader's interpretation (or the text's "destination" (p148)) is considered more relevant than the intentions of the original author. This has been expanded upon on in texts such as Seymour's 2017 analysis of Barthes' work, reiterating Bathes' belief that the reader's interpretation is central in "determining what a text means" and that a text "is a meeting-point, even a clash, of several discourses and interpretations" (p31) rather than presenting a single authoritarian meaning.

Though criticism of Barthes theory exists (such as Burke's belief in the theory's "implausibility" (1992, p14)), the dialogic approach between author, text and reader that Barthes suggests is evocative of the processes of adaptation that will be explored later within this chapter. As adaptation theorist Linda Hutcheon discusses, the adapter filters a story through their own sensibilities and interests (2013, p18), and it could be argued so too does the reader "working with the text to decode signs and then to create meaning" (2013, p134). Similarly, adaptation theorist Julie Sanders has discussed how reading/viewing/playing mythic adaptations like *God of War* engenders a "collaboration between reader and narrative in the production of meanings" (2016, p100) and encourages individual readings of myth (p104). As Sanders continues in *Adaptation and Appropriation*, a combination of being a mythic adaptation and allowing for reader reception (as will be argued that *God of War*'s Norse era does) allows an "old story" to become "a very new one" (p104). These individual readings encourage an "ongoing, evolving production of meaning and an ever-expanding network of textual relations and value-systems" (p4) allowing the myths to endure.

Cory Barlog, director of *God of War* 2018, has even encouraged multiple readings of of the game stating, "the story has multiple lenses that you can view it through" (cited in PlayStation Access, 2020) and deliberately constructed many aspects of the game to be open to interpretation. In one sequence when Kratos encounters Athena, a character killed in a previous game, Barlog included her in a way that "you would be wondering the entire time was she real? Was she in his head? Or was she real and in his head? I think both of those things are entirely possible" (cited in Gamespot, 2019). Barlog's intended ambiguity and explicit openness to audience interpretation supports the textual analysis Fürsich proposes, which encourages the possibility of multiple readings (2009, p243). Context regarding the production and producers of the *God of War* series, like that of

Barlog's intentions with Athena, is referenced within the thesis, which could be argued to contradict Barthes' beliefs. However, more contemporary discussions of textual analysis, like that of Greg Philo have referenced the importance of reader knowledge of this context. Philo references how they believe reader knowledge of production, content and reception when constructing a textual analysis is necessary, contributing to a "total system" analytical approach (2007, p194). This importance is also discussed by Fürsich, however they reference the limitations of believing, as Philo does, that this knowledge *must* be considered. Instead Fürsich explains how these details can and should contribute to the larger textual analysis, as this thesis does, however the intention of textual analysis should instead strive to present wider "imaginary possibilities" (2009, p247). These possibilities should explore the "ideological potential of the text between production and consumption" (2009, p249), even if doing so contradicts the larger contexts of intention and interpretation. Following Fürsich's approach this thesis will consider wider contexts of the production of *God of War* where appropriate but will provide a larger focus upon individual reader-based analysis. The approaches presented by Barthes can still be considered relevant to this discussion despite the inclusion of producer intentions due to the production methods of modern media. *God of War*, and the wider video game medium, requires collaborative practice with often hundreds of individuals contributing to a single final product. Barlog has discussed the collaborative nature of the production of 2018's *God of War*, actively inviting creative discourse and criticism to produce the finished piece (PlayStation Access, 2020). Despite the management and creative structures in place on the production of a triple-A game to produce a unified vision, the production teams will provide individual creative input, arguably confusing the concept of a singular auteur of *God of War*. Additionally, textual analysis of *God of War* provided opportunities to discuss interpretations and readings of the processes Santa Monica Studios has employed in adapting the myths to address contemporary issues related to masculinities.

In order to produce a theoretically informed approach to the study addition research was also conducted into adaptation theory, queer theory and prior academic investigations of related texts, such as Steven Conway's analysis of *God of War* and its relationship with toxic masculinity (2020). The criteria employed for source inclusion was built around the relevancy of the literature, specifically focusing upon texts that discuss the relationship between text and reader, adaptation and the representation of masculinity. Additionally, when discussing Norse mythology, a focus was placed on texts that explored the concept of its adaptation and reinvention and why this may have significance in contemporary western culture. Source backgrounds were expanded to include those from a more popular-culture context, employing articles and web-based discussions of related topics. These are infrequent, only including sources citing information pertinent to the discussion

where the topic had perhaps not been explored academically at the time of writing, such as the discussion regarding the Ballad of Jari and Somr in Chapter 2:1 - Queerness and Family. It is acknowledged that there is wide public online discourse regarding the franchise, however much of this was discounted in favour of the growing number of academic discussions regarding *God of War* such as that of Nyíri (2022), Jordan (2023), Conway (2020), Medina (2020) and Himawan (2022).

Adaptation

Many texts discussing adaptation focus upon the translation between literature and film and though this discussion will primarily focus upon the relationship between video game and myth (in literature form), these theories can still be considered applicable to this study. Adaptation, as described by cinema studies academic Timothy Corrigan, is "how one or more entities are reconfigured or adjusted through their engagement with or relationship to one or more other texts or objects" (2017, p23). This reconfiguring often leads the discourse on adaptation, referencing the "authenticity" of the adaptation and if it is true to the original text. However, as Imelda Whelehan attests, assessment of an adaptation's textual fidelity is an "inexact science, dogged by value judgements" (1999, p9). This discussion of *God of War* and its adaptation of Norse myth will explore this "inexact science" however it will not focus upon the similarities and differences that can be commented upon to determine if it can be considered authentic. Instead, it will try to focus on how *God of War* can be argued to, as Whelehan continues, "iconoclastically demolish" (p16) the original writings to provide the reader/viewer/player with pleasure. It will be argued this is true of *God of War*, and how this demolishing is integral to the ongoing survival of Norse mythology.

Theorist Gérard Genette explored adaptation in his text *Palimpsests* (1997) initially discussing his recognition of what he believes are the five relationships that comprise transtextuality, a term referencing the interconnected relationships shared by separate texts. These include intertextuality (the presence of one text within another), paratextuality (secondary products that directly relate to and support the primary text), metatextuality (commentary upon a text), architextuality (relationships to other texts through macro aspects such as belonging to a genre) and hypertextuality wherein a text is "derived from another pre-existent text" (p5) or as Gennette coins "the hypotext". It is this hypertextuality that most closely aligns with the definition of adaptation this discussion will explore but, as Genette states, the categories are not mutually exclusive and will frequently overlap one another (p7). Genette further explored the hypertext through breaking it into categories depending upon the secondary text's relationship with the original and its intended tone. Employing this approach *God of War*'s Norse saga can be identified as a transposition (p28), defined as a "serious transformation" (being "serious" in mood rather than playful, satirical or an imitation).

Though the Norse saga is at times satirical and playful (itself a ludic interactive text) utilising Genette's categories it is most closely aligned with the transposition.

Contributing to James Naremore's 2000 essay collection *Film Adaptation*, Robert Stam discussed the dialogics of adaptation wherein he references a desire to abandon discussions of fidelity. Stam instead stresses the importance of exploring adaptation as a way of introducing a text into an "intertextual dialogism" (p64), highlighting a source's relationship with other media. Stam continues how "All texts are tissues of anonymous formulae, variations on those formulae, conscious and unconscious quotations, and conflations and inversions of other texts" (p64). Here Stam posits how every text (not just limited to adaptation) is part of a larger intertextual relationship with what has come before, through genre codes, iconography and direct or indirect referencing to the producer's influences. Here Stam, as the collection's title suggests, discusses the filmic adaptation of literature, stating how cinema is an adaptive sensorially rich cannibalisation. Film adaptation amalgamates "all kinds of literary and pictorial symbolism, to all types of collective representation, to all ideologies, to all aesthetics, and to the infinite play of influences within cinema, within other arts, and within culture generally" (p61). This can be considered analogously relevant to video games due to its similarity to film, with both utilising a visual and auditorial combination of media. Film has been referenced to continuously drive the technical and narrative development of video games (Hall, 2018, p87), building upon Stam's assessment and further developing the connection between the two mediums.

In addition to indirect influence video games have frequently directly adapted world mythology (Guyker, 2016), such as *Immortals Fenyx Rising* (2020), *Hades* (2020) and *Okami* (2006), and specifically Norse myth such as *Jotun* (2015), *Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice* (2017) and *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* (2020). Johan Huizinga, in his discussion related to the human desire for play *Homo Ludens* (1971), references myth being "rooted in the primaeval soil of play" (p6) suggesting an inherent connection between mythology and a desire to participate, engendering myth's use within the medium. This use of myth within gaming can be explored through the theory of remediation, wherein media producers "borrow the representational practices of other (earlier or contemporary) forms, while at the same time, seeking to refashion these older forms" (Bolter, 2002, p79). Jay David Bolter, one of the originators in the analysis of the theory of remediation, expounded upon this concept in 2000 in Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies. Bolter references how games are defined by remediating television, film, photography and painting, refashioning "almost every previous visual and textual medium" (p62). From this it can be argued that video games build upon what has come before, reinforcing Stam's statement

regarding the intertextual relationship of all media and employing Genette's transtextuality of hypotext to hypertext.

Stam expresses a desire to focus upon analysis of an adaptation's dialogue to its hypotext as a way of examining how a source is adapted through "selection, amplification, concretization, actualisation, critique, extrapolation, analogization, popularization, and reculturalization" (2000, p68). This dialogue shared between hypotext and hypertext is particularly useful to this discussion through the differences, or translations as Stam states them, that are present in the game compared to the original source material and earlier franchise entries. Stam argues that the intellectual merit of discussing those differences comes not from the moralistic approach of assessing fidelity, but instead through exploring how the game creates a dialogue with the source texts to create something new whilst maintaining a conscious recognition of what has come before.

Linda Hutcheon, in her book *A Theory of Adaptation* (2013), references and expands upon the work of Stam and Genette with further discussions of wider theory (including formalist and feminist amongst others) and general issues surrounding adaptation. *A Theory of Adaptation* expands upon an article Hutcheon wrote for Daedalus in 2004 where she states her intentions for the book, highlighting a desire to appreciate adaptations not as parasitic or derivative of an original text (p111), and explore how adaptation is an aspect of our collective unconscious. This suggestion of adaptation as an "inclination of the human imagination" (p108) echoes similar beliefs regarding myths that are posited by Carl Gustav Jung who, in his book The Four Archetypes (2003 edition, though originally published in 1972), explores how specific archetypes reappear throughout art, literature and culture due to this collective unconscious. Though Jung has referenced that there are many archetypes in his work, one of Jung's texts, The Four Archetypes, focuses on the Mother, Rebirth, Spirit and the Trickster. This is additionally explored in his 1968 second edition collection The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious where Jung posits that humanity has developed myth, religion and folklore as a way of projecting these archetypes buried within our unconscious (such as Loki as a manifestation of the Trickster). This then could perhaps provide a rationale for the adaptation of Loki (and Loki-like characters) in contemporary texts, demonstrating an inherent drive within the subconscious to explore these stories through projection (1968, p7), adapting myths through media texts.

In *A Theory of Adaptation* Hutcheon explores adaptation media beyond those previously referenced which have predominantly focused on literature and film to include, among others, video games (p9). This knowledge and understanding of video games, and their position as an adaptive medium, references how video games as adaptations should not be considered ancillary to their source material (often adaptations of film) (p199) and instead considered as adaptations "in their

own right" (p172). Hutcheon explores the process of adaptation, the benefits of its use for producers and audiences and discusses how adaptations can evolve the source story whilst avoiding a mere retelling, walking the fine line of "repetition without replication" (p7). One topic Hutcheon references, transcultural adaptation, seems especially relevant to a discussion on *God of War*'s Norse era. In the Norse era of the games, Scandinavian myths from the thirteenth century are being adapted by an American company in the twenty first and, as Hutcheon argues, such an adaptation brings "alterations in cultural associations" (p145). These alterations are influenced by the cultural context in which they were made, perhaps rationalising the representations of masculinity the games portray as the culture and the medium itself changes (or is trying to be changed).

To adaptation theory writer Paul Edwards (2007), Hutcheon's work has become one of two main approaches to studying adaptation, the other being the work of Julie Sanders. Sanders' analysis of adaptation theory comments upon the varieties within adaptation and posits that all of these translations fall into one of two categories, either an *adaptation* or an *appropriation* (2016). Sanders work, however, should not be thought of as antithetical to Hutcheon who herself discussed "appropriation" as an adaptive process of re-creation (2013, p8) or interpretive creation through an adapter's "own sensibility, interests, and talents" (2013, p18). Though Hutcheon's definition of appropriation could be argued to discuss adaptation more generally, Sanders provides a definition for both adaptation and appropriation to differentiate more explicitly.

Sanders defines an adaptation as often being "reinterpretations of established (canonical or perhaps just well-known) texts in new generic contexts or perhaps with relocations of an 'original' or source text's cultural and/or temporal setting which may or may not invoke a generic shift" (p24). This suggests a revisioning of a narrative that remains "faithful" to the source text but may change some aspects, such as when and where the text is set or when remediated into a different medium (or as Sanders refers to it "genre"). Appropriation then is more of a dramatic departure from the source material and instead creates "a wholly new cultural product and domain, often through the actions of interpolation and critique as much as through the movement from one genre to others" (p35).

Sanders explains that appropriations are not defined through changing the story's setting but instead through its inclusion of critique or commentary. This commentary upon the original work does not need to be negative or critical, but should avoid imitation and focus on "supplementing, improvising, innovating and amplifying" (p15). *God of War*'s Norse era does explicitly adapt the Ragnarök tales of the Eddas, but through employing Sanders' methodology and definitions, the games' narratives could be described as an appropriation of the myths. The games' narratives vary wildly from the tales as written but through doing so the Norse era complicates the player's

understanding of the myths which Sanders emphasises is crucial to appropriation, avoiding becoming a mere clone of the urtext. Through this appropriation *God of War* is able to comment upon the myths it adapts, the prior franchise and contemporary conceptions regarding masculinity.

This consideration of *God of War*'s Norse era as an appropriation of Norse myth suggests a reinvention of these myths, adding to the multiple versions that already exist within art and culture. This is can be argued to be similar to how the DC character Batman has been frequent reinvented, as discussed by Will Brooker in his 2012 book *Hunting the Dark Knight*. Brooker explores Batman's over 70-year history (at the time of Brooker's writing) and his ability to exist as "multiple but simultaneous variants" (pX). Brooker discusses various modern iterations of the character which contributes to a network or matrix of character which generates "a conversation between past and present" (p170). An acknowledgment of a character's matrix is integral to exploring a frequently adapted figure, regardless of any perceived original versions or, as Brooker terms them, "aberrations" that are less fondly considered within the public sphere. Brooker's discussion factors in several decades of *Batman*'s adaptations and interpretations, however this matrix approach can be applied to any tales and characters that has been repeatedly re-envisioned Like Norse myth and Loki.

Masculinity

This discussion will explore how *God of War*'s Norse era uses adaptation to explore the representation of alternative masculinities, contributing to discussions regarding the character's prior representations in their source material and other contemporary adaptations. Alternative masculinities often refer to non-traditional views of masculinity or marginalised masculinities that differ from the hegemonic "norm" (Connell, 2005, p78). Raewyn Connell's definition of hegemonic masculinity references a reinforcement of legitimizing the patriarchy and ensuring the dominance of men over women (2005, p77). There have since been critiques of Connell's initial definition (originally published in 1995) such as that of Demetrakis Demetriou referencing how it fails to acknowledge the "multiplicity of femininities and masculinities" as well as suggesting that alternative masculinities (and femininities) are considered deviant (2001, p339). Instead Demetriou suggests that hegemonic masculinity is a hybrid of a variety of differing forms of masculinity, including that of queer masculinities. Connell and James Messerschmidt have responded to this claim stating that though there is evidence of appropriation of queer masculinities they do not believe that this has reached a hegemony at the regional or global level (2005, p845). Through Connell's definition and later article clarifying their position on the inclusion of queer masculinities

and those alternative masculinities who demonstrate, arguably, more feminine traits in *God of War* can be considered non-hegemonic.

Connell and Messerschmidt continue to reference how hegemonic masculinities are likely unattainable and do not represent the lives of real men and instead provide “ideals, fantasies, and desires” (2005, p838). The aspirational nature of hegemonic masculinity aligns with *God of War* creator David Jaffe’s intention to "give players a character who they can play and who really does let them go nuts and unleash the nasty fantasies they have in their heads” (cited in Guess and Seraphim, 2005, p203). Kratos, and the other hyper masculinities on show in the Greek era, propagated a hegemonic masculinity through player actions that, assumed by Jaffe, fulfilled player fantasies appealed to through the use of violence as the core gameplay mechanic (Vanden Elzen & Vanden Elzen, 2019).

Connell debates masculinity’s inherent relationship with violence (2005, p258) but, as is discussed later, there is a perceived relationship between violence and toxic masculinity, wherein the concept of manhood is taken to the dangerous extreme. Connell does admit that though masculine hegemony does not inherently engender more violent tendencies in men, it is frequently supported by the use of force (2005, p832). Behnke and Meuser have referenced an increasing “yearning” within hegemonic masculinity for security through mimicking behaviours of characters like John Rambo or those proposed by “macho” culture (2001, p170). This macho culture is defined as, among other elements, a reinforcement of perceiving “violence as manly” (Mosher and Tomkins, 1988, p61) which, as will be further discussed, Kratos within the Greek era reinforces.

However, this connection between hegemonic masculinity and violence and the alternative masculinities explored within the Norse era also exhibiting violence could suggest a dissonance. However, Demetriou, Meuser and Behnke have all referenced a multiplicity of masculinities, wherein different varieties of masculinity can appropriate elements of others. It can be argued then that the alternative masculinities referenced within this discussion who are violent have adopted this violence from the current hegemony whilst retaining their separate status. The context in which this violence is depicted, as will be discussed further in a *Chapter 1. Kratos*, distances the alternative from the hegemonic masculinities.

Connell has also referenced how these alternative and hegemonic masculinities appear within a hierarchy, with hegemonic masculinity being considered superior to all others, especially in relation to any element of queer masculinity which is considered lowest of the male gender hierarchy. However, these are not the only forms of “subordinated masculinities” and any masculinity (including heterosexual masculinities) differing from the hegemonic norm are considered less-than within said hierarchy (2005, p78-79). It is these subordinated masculinities that will be

explored, including those of queer representation and those demonstrating traits that differ from the suggested hyper masculine hegemony.

Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1999) explores the performative nature of gender and its construction. Despite Connell's reference to a hierarchical structure of masculinity, Butler argues how "multiple identifications can constitute a nonhierarchical configuration of shifting and overlapping identifications" (p84) suggesting an individual can (and likely will) have a variety of differently gendered identifiers that do not become reductive to their identity. This is explored further in *Chapter 3. Loki* exploring feminine traits in, and queering of, traditionally considered heterosexual hyper masculine characters such as Thor. The Norse era explores how feminising and queering characters represents the concept of the "Other", an aspect Butler references regarding how individual's construct sexual differences (p131, p183). The queering and the feminisation of protagonists and surrounding characters provides an "other" to the hyper-masculine Æsir potentially achieving Butler's "denaturalization of gender" (p190), or at least presenting alternative masculinities within a franchise that has historically gamified the beliefs inherent within toxic masculinity (Morgan, 2020: Himawan, *et al*, 2022: Conway, 2020: Plante, 2018: Joho, 2018).

It can be argued then that the Norse era of games employ Gramsci's concept of counter-hegemonic subversion (1992) (wherein the commonly expected social expectations are challenged) to explore identity performativity, allowing players predominantly playing within a medium designed for a male heterosexual audience (Biscop, Malliet and Dhoest, 2019, p27) to experience gameplay that depicts alternative identities to their own, or allow them to experiment with a latent identity within themselves within a safe space (Frasca, 2001). If so, as Biscop, Malliet and Dhoest attest, *God of War* can be seen to encourage players "to empathise with characters deviating from the masculine, heterosexual norm", potentially "propose new approaches on gender role taking" (2019, p29) and "subvert traditional ways of thinking about gender and sexuality" (2019, p35).

One way that subversive performativity can be stated to be present in a text, as will be argued for *God of War*, is through queering (or queer reading), wherein the critical lens through which audiences read a text highlights queer behaviour and traits in traditionally considered heteronormative content (Young, 2012, p127). Within video games it can be referred to as "queering play" (Sihvonen and Stenros, 2018) where gender and sexuality is subverted through player exploration and textual reading (Biscop, Malliet and Dhoest, 2019, p35). The queering in *God of War* that will be discussed utilises Barthes' textual analysis methods, legitimising reader interpretation. This is additionally supported through the work of Brooker and the matrix of character and how militancy in the binary depiction of a character, especially their sexuality, is detrimental to the enduring nature of mythical characters (2012, p183) such as those in *God of War*. As discussed by

Alan Sinfield in *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading*, once a text provides appropriate opportunity for reader interpretation it then cannot then prevent "the drawing of reactionary inferences by readers" (1992, p48) even outside of readings the producers may anticipate. Readers do not have to respect closures present in a text and can instead develop readings that can be considered dissident or (as this discussion will term it as) subversive.

Each of these core theories will support this discussion of the adaptation of myths and prior interpretations of characters who feature within the game as well as *God of War*'s choice of representation of masculinity in its lead characters.

Characters of *God of War*'s Norse Era

This discussion will focus on the two primary protagonists of the *God of War* Norse era, Kratos and his son Atreus. Each will be explored in their own chapter establishing how each explores masculinity, specifically their representation of non-traditional, non-hegemonic masculinities. This will draw upon the aforementioned approach to adaptation, masculinity and queer theory as well as textual analysis of sequences from the games to illustrate the topics discussed.

Kratos first appeared in *God of War* (2005) as an original creation for the game series and was not based upon an existing mythological character of the Greek tales, unlike many of the other characters present in the story. Kratos was designed to be a brutally violent character with the expressed purpose, as previously referenced by the series creator, to allow players " go nuts and unleash the nasty fantasies they have in their heads" (Jaffe cited in Guess and Seraphim, 2005, p203). The 2005 title facilitated this intention with a bloody narrative where Kratos "mercilessly rip[s] the life out of innocents" (Sulic, 2005) and players engage in quick time events where they can assist Kratos in having casual sex with poorly characterised female characters (*Naked Woman 1* and *2* respectively).

Kratos is presented as a tortured figure, mercilessly murdering most NPCs (non-player characters) the story presents due to his desire to rid himself of his nightmares that replay the errors of his youth. It is revealed during the conclusion of *The Challenge of Poseidon*, in the latter part of the 2005 game, that the nightmares he references are visions of the day he was deceived into murdering his wife and daughter by Ares the Greek God of War whom Kratos has sworn fealty. Kratos is presented as so blind with rage that in his quest to murder the innocents of a village, "butcher[ing] all who would oppose his new master" (*God of War: Unearthing the Legend*, 2010), that he did not recognise his family until he had already killed them. As punishment, the ashes of his family are grafted to his skin as a permanent reminder of his transgression, giving Kratos his ashen pallor and his moniker as the *Ghost of Sparta*. The anger felt towards Ares (and the Greek pantheon

by proxy) drives much of narrative of the Greek era of the games between 2005-2013 (ignoring re-releases of prior games). The Kratos of this era has been reflected upon by Steven Conway in the *Games and Culture* Journal as the "archetypal representation of toxic masculinity" (2019, p943). This perceived toxic depiction of Kratos and his maturation within *God of War* (2018) has fuelled much of the academic discussions of the character and the game series.

Much has been written on the transformation (or adaptation) of the character of Kratos from the original Greek era to the Norse era of the franchise, focusing on his (and the franchise's) depiction of masculinity. Academics including Himawan *et al* (2022), Morgan (2020), Nyíri (2022) and the aforementioned Conway (2019) have specifically focused on the overall depictions of masculinity in *God of War*. These discussions also explore how Kratos' evolution is indicative of how the Norse saga presents "different degrees of men" (Himawan *et al*, p15) and "changing masculinities" (Nyíri, p85) rather than the Greek's saga masculine focus upon "one defining characteristic, rage" (Conway, p943). Morgan expands his conversation into exploring how Kratos represents a maturation of the medium of video games, from its initial mirroring of "boyhood" sensibilities (p17) (building upon Burrill's study from 2008) to what is more frequently seen now in a more mature modern gaming landscape. For Morgan, Kratos transformation from murderous psychopath to caring father is indicative of the need for the medium's narrative evolution and "new forms of expression" (p11).

This is explored in greater detail by Medina (2020), who discusses similar topics, but focuses specifically on the depiction of fatherhood in the games. In this study, due to the constantly evolving nature of video games over the previous 40 years, gaming narratives have had to mature to meet the developing technical proficiencies of the medium and the demands of its audiences. Kratos evolution from Greek to Norse era can be argued to represent gamer's demands for "something more complex" (p92) with 2018's *God of War* providing "a disruptive break, a necessary evolution" (p93) which is achieved, Medina explains, through Kratos becoming a father. Though Kratos has been depicted as a father to his daughter Calliope in the original Greek era, this is reduced to minimal cut scenes throughout the era's games. Kratos' relationship with his daughter is only hastily explored, serving as an act of "fridging", a term coined by Gail Simone in 1999, wherein a female character is assaulted, depowered or killed in a narrative to rationalise and provide motivation for the male protagonist to then enact their violent revenge.

Contrastingly to the Greek era, the Norse era focuses in on a familial relationship between Kratos and Atreus, using a desire to protect and care for his child as the defining drive for Kratos in the narrative. Medina continues to explore how fatherhood allows Kratos to break his cycle "of hate and revenge his life had become" (p96) distancing the game from previous entries. Kratos' fatherhood is further explored by Jordan (2023) who delves into the 2018 game's narrative whilst

applying Morman and Floyd's 2006 "Good Fathering" theory (wherein being a good father is quantified through an adherence to the four characteristics of love, availability, involvement and being a role model,). Through the application of this theory Jordan definitively claims that Kratos' actions depicted in the 2018 *God of War* he is able to achieve the title of good father.

> In love, he understands, appreciates, respects, and hopes through naming Atreus. In the role model, he acts as a quick helper, advisor, a man of his own word, and a father who overcomes his bad character. In the availability, he is present when his son needs him, emphasizes his physical existence, and worries. In the involvement, he follows Atreus' interests and shows changes in getting more involved. (p145)

Jordan's discussion of Kratos' positive evolution and maturation, in conjunction with the other previously mentioned character studies of Kratos, provide a base of academic understanding for the character and franchise, supporting this discussion's exploration of Kratos' evolution and adaptation. This discussion will contribute to the larger discussion of Kratos' fathering, exploring this representation and expanding into *Ragnarök*, which the prior referenced discussions do not examine due to being written or published prior to its release.

Though the Kratos of 2018's *God of War* could be viewed as an adaptation, he is not a direct adaptation of any specific mythological character. Kratos (or Cratos), the God/Personification of Strength, does exist within Greek mythology, first mentioned in the *Hesiod Theogony* (Trzaskoma, Smith and Brunet, 2016, p143). These characters demonstrate some similarities with Kratos/Cratos in *Prometheus Bound* (Bevan, 1902) depicted as similarly brutal and cruel to *God of War*'s Kratos. However, these characters are unrelated, with the title of *Kratos* only being allocated to the as-yet unnamed protagonist of *God of War* due to its translation in Greek as the word "strength" (Lowe, 2009, p82). *God of War 3* director Stig Asmussen has since referenced this naming was merely a "happy mistake" (cited in *God of War: Unearthing the Legend*, 2010).

This differs from the character of Atreus who, during 2018's story, is revealed as Loki, the Norse god of mischief. This direct adaptation of the Norse god was not, it should be noted, the original intention for the character of Kratos' son. Cory Barlog, the 2018 game's director, reflected upon the organic transition of Atreus into Loki mid-development when approached by the story team. The overwhelmingly positive reaction to their suggestion led to their pitch being "verbatim the lines that were used in the game" (Barlog cited in Gamespot, 2018) when Loki's identity is revealed in the conclusion of *God of War*.

Loki as a character has a near inexhaustible wealth of academic discussion devoted to him, with there being "almost as many opinions [about Loki] as there are scholars" (Stanton Crawley, 1939, p310) and how Loki "has been the catalyst for countless unresolved scholarly controversies and has elicited more problems than solutions" (von Schnurbein, 2000, p109). There are many conflicting beliefs and theories regarding this figure based on the surviving information available. This is perhaps best summarised by Laidoner in their discussion of how the figure of Loki reflects the traditions of the Sámi, the indigenous people of northern Europe, listing a variety of interpretations attributed to Loki.

> "the Nordic Devil (Skúli Magnússon 1780; Finnur Magnússon 1828; Bugge 1881), a chthonic deity or fire-god (Grimm, I, 2004 [1835]; Petersen 1863; Wisén 1873; Rydberg 2004 [1889]; Much 1898; Schück 1904; Liberman 1992), to the suggestion that he originated as a spider (Rooth 1961), a wolf (Rask 1834; Petersen 1863) or even a corpse eater (Schoning 1903)." (2012, p60).

This list, however, is not exhaustive with many additional beliefs being explored such as a focus on Loki as a benevolent narrative catalyst (von Schnurbein, 2000; Stanton Cawley, 1939), an anti-functional god that through his actions presents the Æsir with their function (Frakes, 1987), the primordial manifestation of metis (cunning intelligence) (Wanner, 2009) and the embodiment of gender fluidity (Bassil-Morozow, 2017; Richardson-Read, 2021; Jakobsson, 2020). These wide-ranging interpretations highlight Loki's ability to be analysed through a variety of lenses, and it is this variety that has led to the ability for media producers to explore the character through a multitude of representations.

Depictions of, and references to, Loki have appeared in media products throughout the 20th and 21st century, exploring different elements of the character whilst, arguably, remaining recognisably Loki. The most recognisable interpretation of Loki will likely be that of Marvel's interpretation, with the character appearing across lists of the most popular characters across cinematic history (Ranker, 2022; Garcia, 2022; White, 2022). Beyond more direct adaptations of the tales from the Eddas some depictions include Loki being the leader of a consortium of the gods of modern society (Gaiman, 2001; *American Gods*, 2017-2021), confined into a mask that grants the wearer godlike reality altering powers (*The Mask*, 1994), a paranormal investigator (*Mythical Detective Loki Ragnarok*, 2003), a disguised archangel Gabriel (*Supernatural*, 2005-2020), a renegade alien scientist (*Stargate SG-1 "Fragile Balance"*, 2003), ultimate Persona of the Fool arcana (*Persona* and *Shin Megami Tensei* series of games, 1987-2024), a lawyer (Colin Gundersen in *The Almighty*

Johnsons, 2011-2013), a young boy with the power of fire (Luke in *Eight Days of Luke*, Wynne Jones, 1975) and reincarnated as a genderfluid secondary school student (Laurits Seier in *Ragnarok*, 2020-2023). Other contemporary media products take influence from Loki and Norse mythology without direct character adaptation including *Eve Online* (2003) and the Loki space cruiser, known for its flexibility and ability to change its primary systems when needed, echoing Loki's trickster nature and ability to transform himself. Loki's adaptations are vast and varied, demonstrating his abundant wellspring for interpretation. As will be discussed, Loki has an ability to be repeatedly transformed to match the needs and beliefs of the culture and time in which the adaptation is originated from whilst remaining core elements of *Loki-ness*, including through *God of War*'s Atreus.

Norse Mythology

Concepts developed in *Death of the Author* and the referenced adaptation theories are perhaps more relevant within Norse mythology than others due to its ambiguously authored nature. Norse paganism was predominantly (if not exclusively) an oral based religion, with elders passing on the dogma and practice through spoken stories where "myths began simply as entertaining tales, and only gradually acquired significance and deeper meanings" (O'Donoghue, 2008, p2). This could explain why characters such as Loki can have such a wide variety of textual readings with varying dialects, regional accents or simply a human's capacity to remember and recall information could have led to differences in names, characteristics and the stories themselves. These issues would then have been compounded when collected into what we now have as the only remaining texts of the era, two Icelandic texts called the *Prose Edda* written by Snorri Sturluson (with Sturluson being a patronym, he will be referred to as Snorri hereafter) and the anonymous author of the *Poetic Edda*. Andrén *et al* in *Old Norse Religion in Long-term Perspectives: Origins, Changes & Interactions* (a collection of the papers presented at the 2004 international conference on Norse paganism) discuss the difficulty with ever discovering an original version of these stories.

> As many scholars have stressed, oral tradition is both changeable and rich in variation. An extant text is therefore just one possible variant of a narrative. And since pictures of the same narrative can render other versions, the relationship between artefact and text is only indirect (2006, p13).

Andrén *et al* reference how, due to Norse paganisms origins in oral storytelling, there was likely never one "true" urtext of the tales and the versions of the mythology that have survived into the modern era are only one version of what was likely recounted across medieval Scandinavia in the

Viking Age. Andrén *et al* go on to reference that "there were profound chronological, regional and social differences in pre-Christian religious practice in Scandinavia. The archaeological traces and rites are in fact so different in time and place that one can seriously question the term 'Norse Paganism'" (2006, p13). This suggests that Norse mythology, from its oral origins to its collected surviving manuscripts are subjective adaptations.

This is especially evident due the *Edda* manuscripts being written (or collected/edited), in a fully Christian Scandinavian society in Iceland during the thirteenth century, generations after Norse paganism had ceased to be openly practiced and the oral tales recounted. The belief is that the both the *Prose* and the *Poetic Edda* were adapted, mostly, from a singular work, the *Codex Regius*, also referred to as the *Elder Edda* or *King's Book* (Orchard, 2013, pXVI) believed to have been written during the Viking Age between 900 and 1000 AD (Crawford, 2015, p16).

The *Poetic Edda* is believed to be a compilation of skaldic poetry "from the ninth to thirteenth centuries" (McCoy, 2016) with the poems within likely written from across that span of time. This writing process across multiple centuries will have necessitated several authors all contributing to the final collection, potentially suggesting concurrent re-writing of the work into the thirteenth century when Icelandic paganism had been replaced by Christianity. This Christian influence has been discussed regarding the *Prose Edda* also, due to Snorri being raised with a Christian society. Despite being described as "predominantly secular" (Faukes, 2005, pXV) it is widely believed that he was "clearly influenced" by his own religious beliefs (Faukes, 2005, pXI) attempting to align the myths of the Norse pantheon with that of Christianity to make them more palatable to his audience and to ensure they did not significantly contradict his beliefs and those of his society. Snorri, it is referenced, would "not have felt inhibited from inventing new stories or drastically altering old ones if he saw fit" (Faukes, 2005, pXXVI) and it is believed that he did so when discovering plot holes in the narrative, misinterpreting sources or through choosing to exercise "his own imagination" (McCoy, 2016, p21). The versions of the myths that have survived are themselves an adaptation, influenced by the authors' Christian backgrounds and transcribed from an infinitely variable oral storytelling.

Due to the original oral tradition, its relationship with Christianity and the history of its native people, Norse myths are considered to have never been fixed and are instead a "dynamic network of belief and narrative" (Abram, 2011, pVIII). McCoy summarises this concept succinctly in his exploration of Norse mythology, *The Viking Spirit* with "the best way to be 'true' to the Norse myths and religion is to continue to reinvent them for one's own time and place" (McCoy, 2016, p289). This reinvention through adaptation and appropriation has been present, arguably, since its oral origins, through its 10th century publication and into modern media. *God of War*'s

representation of these myths, though frequently antithetical to the beliefs of the source material can be argued to being a legitimate representation of the myths.

Dennis Redmond in their 2022 discussion reference *Ragnarök*'s "weaknesses" through the game's absence of a direct adaptation of Wagner's *Ring* cycle, which they claim has informed all adaptations of the *Edda*'s tales. Redmond references several examples where the game differs from Wagner's own adaptation, stating that these differences compromise the narrative conclusion expected from a Norse myth adaptation. However, arguably, it is Norse myth's ability to be explored in different ways by different producers and cultures that allows for the tales to endure, even if some content deemed necessary to tell the tales is left absent or changed. Each retelling and reinvention present a recontextualised version of the tales, containing implicit and explicit values of the culture that developed it. But as McCoy references, this doesn't make its versions of the tale less "true", but instead adds to its matrix of representation, building upon the versions that have come before to add to "a conversation between past and present" (Brooker, 2012, p170). Robert William Gyker Jr. in his 2016 paper "Myth in Translation: the Ludic Imagination in Contemporary Video Games" stated "It is media that keeps myth timely, while myth keeps media engaged with the timeless" (p405). Here Gyker references myths enduring strength to inspire across generations through adaptation and its exploration through each emerging medium (p403). This paper will explore how Norse myth is able to achieve this timelessness through exploring contemporary issues through the medium of video games, allowing players to directly experience the myths through interactivity.

To that end Chapter 1 will focus upon the character Kratos, looking at his evolution within the series, his representation of fatherhood and his oppositional representation to toxic masculinity. Chapter 2 provides context regarding the wider representation of queer narratives and content within the Norse era before exploring it in greater detail in relation to a single character in the following chapter. Chapter 3 explores the representation of Loki through the character of Atreus, providing relevant background on the mythical figure of Loki and their adaptation within the Norse saga, with a focus upon Atreus' othering and as a representation of LGBTQA+ groups. These case studies will discuss how each character's adaptation explores a specific aspect regarding the representations of differing masculinities in potential opposition to the hyper-masculine representation often associated with Norse myth and from contemporary video game culture.

"For the sake of our children. We must be better."
Kratos.

Chapter 1 - Kratos

This chapter will explore the character of Kratos and his evolving relationship with the representation of masculinity building upon the previously referenced discussions of Himawan *et al* (2022), Morgan (2020), Nyíri (2022), Conway (2019), Jordan (2023) and Medina (2020). Expanding upon these prior approaches this discussion intends to contribute to the larger discussion regarding Kratos and masculinity, specifically focusing upon the rejection of the beliefs of toxic masculinity. Firstly, a context regarding Kratos' adaptation of both Greek and Norse myth will be explored and how through doing so comments upon the game's current and prior representations of masculinity. Larger case studies will then be explored discussing Kratos' fatherhood and godhood and how both explore masculinity and attempt to transfer these more nuanced discussions regarding manhood to the player.

Chapter 1:1 – Kratos and Adaptation

As previously discussed, Kratos, the main protagonist of the *God of War* series, has historically been represented as the embodiment of masculinity to an arguably toxic and dangerous degree. The 2018 game and *Ragnarök* complicate this representation by exploring a Kratos that exhibits traits deemed antithetical to the beliefs of hegemonic masculinity. The adaptive processes that have led to the representation of the Norse era's Kratos will be argued to directly contradict the defining traits of "toxic masculinity". These contradictions provide commentary on this representation of masculinity within the franchise and depicts a wider spectrum of what can be considered masculine as compared to the "original" Kratos of the Greek era.

As referenced within the introduction Kratos has been stated to not have been a direct adaptation of any specific character from Greek mythology when first introduced in 2005. However, in the 2010 documentary in *God of War: Unearthing the Legend* several university professors and writers specialising in Greek mythology as well as *God of War III*'s (2010) director Stig Asmussen, discuss Kratos' implicit adaptation through the archetype of the Greek Hero. In the documentary Greek myths are discussed highlighting similarities between Greek heroes and Kratos with Asmussen reflecting that "Hercules slaid the Cerberus. That's what Kratos does. Perseus killed Medusa. Kratos does that as well" (cited in *God of War: Unearthing the Legend*, 2010). The repetitions of action and labours performed by other characters from the Greek pantheon demonstrate the early games' approach to adaptation, more as a desire to restructure narrative elements of the original mythology

(Guyker, 2016, p226), as an appropriation rather than as a direct adaption of the source material. When discussing the original approach to Kratos and the mythological source material Robert E Vardeman, author of the *God of War* novelization, stated the game's story would not be found in conventional Greek mythology, but is instead intended as being representative of Greek mythology "on steroids" (cited in Guyker, 2016, p222).

In *Unearthing the Legend,* the contributors continue to reference how Kratos was developed for the 2005 game to adapt a thematic element present in the myths, the concept of hamartia. Hamartia, referenced in Aristotle's *Poetics*, refers to a tragic error that befalls the Greek hero "that results in irreparable damage to the life of the protagonist and/or the lives of their loved ones" (Tonner, 2008, p2). In the case of Kratos this error takes the form of the accidental murder of his wife Lysandra and young daughter Calliope. Before the start of the 2005 game Kratos' army, the Spartans, have been defeated by the Barbarian hordes with their king poised to deliver the final blow, killing Kratos. In this instant Kratos cries out to the Greek God of War Ares declaring "Destroy my enemies and my life is yours". Ares grants his request, defeating the Barbarians and making Kratos his avatar on earth, shaping him into "the perfect warrior" through ridding Kratos of any emotional ties. Ares sends Kratos to a temple dedicated to rival god Athena wherein he slaughters all inside, only after discovering two of his victims were his wife and young daughter.

In the *Poetics* (Hamilton Fyfe's 1965 translation of original c. 330 BCE text) Aristotle refers to how audiences are unsatisfied with wholly virtuous characters facing negative fortunes and equally unsatisfied by bad characters experiencing good fortunes. Instead, Aristotle references a character in-between these archetypes, more akin to an antihero, who is "not pre-eminently virtuous and just" and who must have a "flaw" (p47 Chapter XIII), or hamartia, within them. The translator of this edition later references how this vaguely defined concept has become a "hotly discussed" topic over identifying its exact definition (p117). Some examples of this contention include contemporary British philosopher Anthony Kenny attributing hamartia to any sort of error, even that of a spelling mistake (2006, p110), whereas medieval Persian philosopher Avicenna stated it as a "straying from the path of duty and losing sight of what is more noble" (cited in Dahiyat, 1974, p106). Gerald Else, the 20th Century American classicist, has been referenced as "the most authoritative critic" (Sackey, 2010, p79) of non-moralist schools of thought regarding Aristotle's "flaw", wherein he stated hamartia is an ignorance that leads to the hero killing their "dear one", specifically a blood relation (1957, p383). Its arguable that Aristotle established storytelling "rules" are still evident in modern narratives (Tierno, 2002: McKee, 1997: Sorkin, 2016: Anderson, 2007), suggesting that Kratos' relationship with hamartia is unsurprising. However, Else's definition of hamartia's aligns with Kratos' family's fate in a very literal way and through doing so indirectly adapts similar Greek myths

such as Heracles and his hamartia of madness, leading him to murder his wife and children (Stafford, 2012, p5). As Sanders discusses, an appropriation provides "a knowingness about the relationships and similarities to an archetypal source" (2016, p90) which can be argued to be present through Kratos' hamartia and parallels to archetypal heroes such as Heracles.

Despite a lack of direct, explicit adaptation of any figure from Greek mythology, the 2018 game does provide Kratos with a moniker of a Norse mythological character who is briefly referenced in the *Prose Edda*. In the conclusion of the 2018 game as Kratos and Atreus finally reach Jötunheim to spread Faye's ashes they investigate a petroglyph mural depicting many of the significant narrative beats of the story which are accompanied by a series of Elder Futhark runes. These can be translated, with the runes identifying Kratos as Farbauti, a Jötnar listed in the *Prose Edda* as Loki's father with no further details of their life or characteristic being provided, simply stating "Named Loki or Lopt, he is the son of the giant Farbauti" (Snorri, 2005, p38). This explicit connection to an existing character of the *Prose Edda* is quickly substantiated due to Atreus' revealed identity as Loki. Further connections can also be referenced due to Farbauti's translation from the runes as *Anger-Striker* in English (Lindow, p111) that could be inferred to address Kratos' martial abilities as well as his ability to diegetically weaponise his rage. Beyond the suitability of the translated name, arguments could be made that this moniker provides only a superficial adaptation of the Norse texts as the choice to make Atreus Loki during the development phase likely came before the connection between Farbauti and Kratos. In an interview with video gaming website *Gamespot* in 2018 Barlog stated plans to make Atreus an adaptation of Loki came mid development, suggesting that Kratos as Farbauti had not been considered yet. This attribution of Farbauti to Kratos is likely present to further the adaptation of Atreus/Loki rather than Kratos himself.

However, similarly to the character's adaptation of Greek myth, it can be argued that Kratos appropriates characters of Norse myth, even of those that appear within the Norse era. Throughout both games, but predominantly within *God of War* 2018, tales from the *Edda*s are adapted to reflect Kratos and his relationship with Atreus. Family structures build up most of the surrounding characters within the Norse era, providing a mirror for Kratos to reflect upon his relationship with his own family.

God of War 2018 takes one of these stories of the *Edda*s, *The Death of Baldr* (Snorri, 2005, p65 and Crawford, 2015, p28), and adapts it to become the core macro adaptation that threads throughout the narrative and is more directly represented in the 2018 game's conclusion. In the original tale Frigg, Baldr's mother, makes a pact with all things (fire, water, metal, diseases etc.) compelling them to swear an oath never to harm Baldr (anglicised to Baldur in *God of War*). In the *Prose Edda* (the story is only briefly referenced within the *Poetic Edda*) this is seen as an

overwhelmingly positive outcome, granting Baldr with powers of invulnerability. However, *God of War* twists the tale to explore the darker potential of the invulnerability and develops it into a lack of feeling, physically or emotionally. In the game Freya (*God of War* posits that Frigg and Freya are the same goddess) is presented as being overprotective of Baldur, casting a spell upon him to protect him, ensuring his invulnerability and immortality much like in the *Edda*s. However, in providing this invulnerability she also stops him from being able to feel anything including pain, empathy, hunger, thirst, lust or exhaustion. This inability to feel anything due to his mother's overprotection turns Baldur insane, resentful and sadistic, hating Freya and leading to his attempted murder of her. This overprotection is framed as explicitly non-consensual with a scene showing Baldur begging his mother to remove the spell's protection so that he may feel again which Freya refuses. Kratos is represented as being similarly overprotective of Atreus, hiding his godhood from him and keeping him at an emotional distance. Freya and Mimir warn Kratos of his deception throughout the early parts of the game which Kratos refuses to heed, believing to know best. Both Kratos and Freya believe they have the right to make these decisions for their children due to their responsibilities as parents. Both believe they are doing what is best for their children with Freya protecting Baldur from a prophesied "needless death" and Kratos saving Atreus from the tragedy he believes is associated with being a god. It is only through Freya's warning, recounting the tale of her relationship with Balder does Kratos understand that he needs to reveal Atreus' true nature and identity.

> "At his birth the runes foretold a needless death. The babe in my arms was so small, so helpless. I knew right then I would do anything to protect him. No matter the sacrifice… Of course everything I did, I did for myself. I let my needs, my fears, come before what he needed…and I couldn't see his resentment until it was too late. Don't make the same mistake. Have faith in him" (Chapter - *The Sickness*).

Kratos mirrors Freya's actions, sparing Atreus from potential pain and hardship, but doing so more to spare himself from reflecting upon his own past actions. If Atreus knew they were both gods Kratos would have to reconcile with that element of his own identity, which he references he has been rejecting during his time in Midgard, choosing to live as a man. It is only through understanding that he is repeating the actions of Freya does Kratos realise his flaw/hamartia.

This adaptation of the *Death of Baldr* is explored in both Freya and Kratos, both as appropriations, commenting upon the original tale. Freya and Balder, the more direct adaptation, expands the tale to comment upon the careless wish fulfilment conceit of the spell, presenting it more as a curse by removing all the things that make living worthwhile as the cost for never dying or feeling pain. This

additional context, exploring potential negatives extrapolated from the consideration of true immortality, as Sanders (2016) references, “complicate[s]” the original story, developing it into an appropriation through “adding, supplementing, improvising, innovating, amplifying” (p15). These additions provide critical commentary on the immortality myth, attacking the positive connotations Baldr’s powers present in the original tales. Attacks like this are referenced by Sanders as being frequently present within an appropriation (p6). This attack infuses the *Eddas’* story with familial trauma through helicopter parenting, a contemporary societal concern wherein parents are overprotective of their children leading to that generation being considered to be unprepared for adulthood (Alsop, 2008).

Kratos and Atreus’ relationship similarly adopts a reading of the framework of the *Edda* story, exploring how a parent’s overprotection can lead directly to the pain that was attempted to be avoided. Baldr in the *Edda* is killed as a result of the invulnerability, with Loki manipulating other Æsir to mistakenly kill Baldr due to his jealousy of the new powers (Snorri, 2005, p33). In *God of War* Kratos’ withholding of information leads to the “sickness” that nearly ends the life of Atreus. In both instances a parent hopes to spare their child from pain only to directly create the environment in which causes it. As Freya attests, her attempt to save Balder was done primarily for selfish reasons in an attempt to avoid feeling emotional pain, which can also be seen in Kratos. Both reject the potential of having to reconcile with intro-punitive emotions through Kratos and feelings of shame over his past and Freya and the potential grief of losing a child. In Kratos this shame manifests as an acute emotional distance from Atreus reflecting Levant’s “restrictive emotionality” (1992, p325) wherein there is a reluctance among men to discuss their feelings and restrict demonstrations of emotions, instead choosing to reflect masculine stoicism. This contributes to the dominant cultural concepts of masculinity proposed by Robert Brannon’s 1976 paper *Male Sex Role: Our Culture's Blueprint of Manhood and What It's Done for Us Lately* (here summarised by Jansz, 2010, p168):

1. **Autonomy** - A man stands alone, bears the tribulations of life with a stiff upper lip, and does not admit his dependences on others.
2. **Achievement** - A man is achieving in work and play in order to be able to provide bread for his loved one and family.
3. **Aggression** - A man is tough, and acts aggressively if the circumstances require so.
4. **Stoicism** - A man does not share his pain, does not grieve openly, and avoids strong, dependent and warm feelings.

These four categories (though occasionally listed through alternative synonymic titles) are stated as being the main characteristics of Western masculinity, all of which are exhibited in Kratos during the Greek era and the majority of the 2018 game (Conway, 2019, p949).

In the 2018 *God of War* Kratos is frequently depicted as autonomous, refusing help (or reluctantly accepting assistance) from surrounding friendly non-playable characters. He is referenced as having frequent solo trips into the wilderness and diegetic game interactions often involve helping and supporting Atreus through obstacles and puzzles whilst engaging with them himself with no assistance. Aggression has been commented upon frequently throughout this discussion and can be attributed to Kratos narratively and through gameplay. Kratos (as discussed when withholding Atreus' godhood) is repeatedly stoic throughout much of the 2018 narrative, suppressing his pro-social and intro-punitive emotions. He silently and invisibly grieves, he withholds positive affirmations towards his son, and when badly injured by Baldur in their first encounter, Kratos refuses to acknowledge his injuries when questioned by a concerned Atreus. Achievement is demonstrated through Kratos' gameplay actions generating currency that can be used at upgrade shops to pay for items for himself and Atreus as well as references to Kratos hunting for his family and building the family home.

With this evidence it could be concluded that Kratos exemplifies Brannon's dominant contemporary cultural concepts of masculinity. However, the game presents this form of masculinity as negative, frequently depicting Kratos as conflicted regarding his outwardly hyper-masculine presentation. During *The Marked Trees* Atreus hunts a deer with a bow, wounding it and causing it to collapse. However, the creature does not die and Kratos demands that Atreus "Finish what you started", indicating that he should kill the deer with his knife. The personal nature of killing the deer in close quarters gives Atreus pause, clearly distressing him. As Atreus hesitates Kratos takes Atreus' hands and guides him into the killing blow. Traumatised by this Atreus looks to the horizon and as he does so Kratos, recognising his child's distress, goes to comfort him. Kratos raises his hand to lay on Atreus' shoulder, though as he is about to make contact he hesitates before withdrawing his hand. This example of stoicism, avoiding "warm feelings" and an overall refusal to demonstrate emotion is not seen as positive in the game, but instead as a missed opportunity to comfort a distressed child. This stoicism fades as the Norse era progresses and is married with explicit reflections upon previous games, often referenced with regret or shame.

One such example appears in *Ragnarök* during the game's downloadable content *Valhalla* (2023), Kratos reflects upon the character of the Boat Captain. In Chapter One of the original *God of War* (2005) Kratos is tasked with defeating a hydra and the various minions accompanying it. During his battles across a ship graveyard he encounters a locked door, behind which women's screams can

Santa Monica Studios (2018) God of War. PlayStation 4. Santa Monica: Sony Interactive Entertainment.

be heard, pleading for Kratos to find the Captain's key and release them. On screen text accompanies the screams stating, "From the sounds of things, this is where the women are trying to hide from the massacre". This reduces the sparse female characters in the game to being described only by their gender and identified by trauma and fear, requiring support from the male protagonist in order to survive. These characters are eventually murdered on screen, providing additional "fridging" for Kratos to legitimise the violence that will proceed within the game as he searches for the Captain.

Kratos continues his battles until he climbs aboard a ship only to see the Boat Captain and his key be devoured by the hydra. Kratos engages the hydra and upon killing it he makes his way into the creature's oesophagus, discovering the Boat Captain alive and desperately attempting to escape from falling into the monster's stomach. The Captain thanks Kratos for saving him only for Kratos to remove his cabin key and then throw him to his certain death. Though the game frames the retrieval of the key to be an honourable act, saving the innocent and in-need, Kratos is framed as needlessly cruel. This cruelty is framed as humorous, seemingly delighting in the misfortune of the less powerful which is later compounded when Kratos encounters the Captain once more, as he plummets toward the River Styx. Kratos is able to stop his descent, grabbing hold of the Captain's legs, again as the latter attempts to climb to safety. Kratos impales the Captain with the Blades of Chaos, using the embedded short sword to gain purchase and climb onto a cliff before turning and unnecessarily kicking the Captain into the river below, again framed for comedy. The Captain became a recurring joke/easter egg in future instalments with appearances (*God of War 2*, 2007) and audio cues (*God of War 3*, 2010). The Boat Captain's treatment is explored in *Valhalla* with Kratos shamedly explaining his actions.

> It would have cost me nothing to show him mercy. His life was in my hands. To be so casually cruel, I… This man did nothing to me and I treated his life *as* nothing. He was not a god who manipulated me, nor bound me in service. I cannot hide behind my thirst for revenge. He was just a man afraid for his life-- attacked and swallowed by a monster he had no hope of defeating. But the Hydra was just an animal. I showed him what a true monster looks like.

The Norse era posits that Kratos' demonstrations of the dominant characteristics of masculinity (such as his *aggressive* treatment of the Captain in order to *achieve* an in-game goal) should be considered "toxic" (Conway, 2019 and Morgan, 2020) and Santa Monica Studios is now using Kratos to reflect upon and address the representations of masculinity that they propagated in previous

games. Previous entries prior to the 2018 reboot represented a Kratos who “possessed a sort of malicious madness” with “a dangerous mindset of callousness and single-minded fury” (Kimara, 2022). This is expanded upon with other descriptions of Kratos, like that of the *Guardian*’s Simon Parkin who crudely summarised Kratos as one who spent their time “tearing the balls from mythological monsters” and “gruffly shagging mute slave girls” (2018). This Kratos was designed by the 2005 game director David Jaffe to address what he perceived was an increase in political correctness (cited in Reed, 2005) and "give players a character who they can play and who really does let them go nuts and unleash the nasty fantasies they have in their heads” (cited in Guess and Seraphim, 2005, p203). Those entries to the series accommodated this intention with frequent wanton violence and depictions of gamified casual heterosexual sex, depicted from the male perspective. Kratos’s representation, and ludic elements of the game, promoted a specific depiction of masculinity often aligning with Janz’s summarised characteristics though taken to the extreme. In discussions regarding misogyny, toxic masculinity and heteronormativity in post-2000 popular culture O’Malley states:

> Toxic masculinity is a narrow and repressive description of manhood, designating manhood as defined by violence, sex, status and aggression. It’s the cultural ideal of manliness, where strength is everything while emotions are a weakness; where sex and brutality are yardsticks by which men are measured, while supposedly “feminine” traits – which can range from emotional vulnerability to simply not being hypersexual – are the means by which your status as “man” can be taken away. (cited in Puckey, 2021, p7)

All the listed attributes from this description can be observed in the actions of the Greek era Kratos as he is aggressive and violent, depicted as engaging in heterosexual sex and is provided status through his designation as a Spartan general and god. The Greek games take heterosexual sex acts and acts of brutality and make them play features, with gameplay and quick time events that attribute fail conditions to players who are not able to, or refuse to, engage in this “toxic” behaviour. The Greek era Kratos does not exhibit emotional vulnerability even when grieving for his family, instead exclusively exhibiting anger.

Animation director for *God of War* and *Ragnarök* and director of *Ragnarök: Valhalla* Bruno Velazquez referenced the games of the Greek era should be considered the studio’s “college years” (cited in Valentine, 2023) in reference to the toxic, immature nature of Kratos’ actions and behaviour. Velazquez continued to reference “we all have grown up and have families of our own. We try to reflect those personal experiences also through Kratos and through some of the other

characters he interacts with". This highlights Santa Monica Studios' approach to the Norse era, instilling the games with the developers' personal experiences and striving to portray a more varied representation of masculinity, exhibiting that "different degrees of men exist" (Himawan, Fatmawaty & Dodiyanto, 2022, p15). Kratos and his changing representation of masculinity has been explored by several writers discussing the evolution between the Greek and Norse era. Morgan references how the Kratos of 2005 "does not need to kill; he wants to" and how 2018's Kratos "is not violent because he wants to be; he is violent because he needs to be. Kratos' and Atreus' survival depend on it" (2020, p10). Medina discusses how the violence demonstrated in the game now "carries a powerful emotional burden" (2020, p93) and Conway references how the game explores the "consequences" of violence (2019, p943). This approach to violent gameplay seems antithetical to the genre of game and a franchise previously dedicated to fetishising expressions of aggression. The Norse era frequently contains graphic depictions of violence, much like the Greek era, and it could be argued that the ludic focus on violence whilst narratively condemning it could create dissonance or be considered hypocritical. However, the initial battle with Baldur (referred to as the Stranger at this point within the narrative) contextualises the violence that will be experienced throughout the rest of the saga. Baldur trespasses on Kratos' property, mocks him and strikes him several times with Kratos merely requesting he leave. After a continued attack Kratos does retaliate, however he pulls his punch (believing Baldur to be human) and rationalises why he became violent in a commiseratory tone. The remaining violence shown in the game is often explored through this lens of reluctant retaliation and defence, with the creatures and characters encountered being openly hostile towards Kratos and Atreus. The Norse era avoids this fetishisation through the violent content's implementation to serve the plot "rather than titillating the player" (Plante, 2018). Though this violence still aligns with the concepts of toxic masculinity previously discussed, the game attempts to rationalise the behaviour as an undesired necessity to defend oneself and, more importantly, protect a young child.

Chapter 1:2 – Fatherhood and Masculinity

This recontextualization of the series' relationship with violence is framed as a result of Kratos' parenthood to Atreus, a relationship which becomes the main thematic core of the 2018 game. The game's emphasis on Kratos' fatherhood became such a focus of the commentary surrounding the release of the 2018 game that it led to the game being humorously monikered "Dad of War" by several reviewers (Hume, 2018, Prince, 2018 and Blakie, 2018). The Norse saga explored Kratos as a more nuanced, three-dimensional character than audiences had previously been exposed to in previous titles within the Greek era. As Medina references, the 2018 game provided a

"disruptive break" from the previous games and gives Kratos a "necessary evolution" (2020, p93) which comes through his relationship with Atreus as his father.

In the late 2010s fatherhood in video games was explored as a topic of academic discourse by Bell, Taylor, and Kampe (2015) and Lucat (2017), referencing various games in which the player embodies a father figure within the gameplay. This was deemed a critical field of study due to the increasing "dadification" (Stang, 2017, p163; Joho, 2014) present in video game narratives such as *The Walking Dead* (2012) and *The Last of Us* (2013). These studies reference a desire for games to challenge the connections between gaming and hyper-masculinities (Bell, Taylor, and Kampe, p20) and addressing the belief that the concept of fatherhood is antithetical to masculinity (wherein parental care is considered a traditionally feminine role). These papers reference how gaming has predominantly presented a traditional form of masculinity, often through violence as a core gameplay mechanic. This violence, when used in tandem with a father-protagonist, legitimises the character's masculinity in the contrasting feminine parental role they inhabit, arguably further propagating toxically masculine beliefs within the gaming communities regarding the structure of masculinities.

As discussed, Connell has referenced a hierarchy of various types of masculinity, with hegemonic masculinity being considered superior to non-traditional views of masculinity and marginalised masculinities (such as homosexuality) (2005, p78). Connell references in another paper coauthored by James Messerschmidt in 2005 how masculinities are constructed through social agents such as media texts. As such, the masculinities presented by Kratos (and other positive male characters within the series) could readdress the masculine hegemony on a society-wide level (p839). The Norse era's representation of Kratos and masculinity appears antithetical in relation to the contemporary hegemony of masculinity seen in games (Lucat, 2017) and prior representation within the Greek era.

This is further explored within the Norse era's narrative through the representation of the antagonists as the "anti-father". Coined by Betrand Lucat (2017), the anti-father is a father who is represented as flawed due to their strict adherence to hegemonic masculinity and toxic approach to paternity. These anti-fathers provide an opposition to the protagonist's fatherhood, often through violence targeted towards their own family and depictions of being leaders of communities (as opposed to the societal isolation of the protagonist). This is evident within *God of War* with the antagonist Æsir representing hyper-masculine godly fathers, ruling as patriarchs of the nine realms. Within the game the in-family violence, referenced by Lucat as a defining trait of an anti-father, is depicted through Thor badly beating his son Modi and Odin murdering his son Thor, both as a result of not being powerful (or arguably masculine) enough to be able to defeat Kratos. These actions are

explored as explicitly negative, further promoting the rejection of hegemonic masculinity and highlighting Kratos' positive non-traditional masculinity through his fatherhood.

Within his discussion Lucat references the anti-fathers in relation to games becoming more father focused, citing examples such as *Bioshock: Infinite* (2013), *The Last of Us* (2013) and *The Witcher 3: The Wild Hunt* (2015). Lucat references an increasing number of video game titles exploring father-child relationships similar to *God of War* which, Parkin posits, "reflects the preoccupations of the men who make them" (2018). This statement has been further corroborated by the developers of *God of War*'s Norse era explicitly referencing how they used the game to explore their own parental relationships (Barlog cited in Klepek, 2017; Velazquez cited in Valentine, 2023), promoting non-hegemonic approaches to fatherhood.

God of War's exploration of masculinity through fatherhood and non-traditional masculinities could be attributed to, as referenced in the introduction, a result of the *God of War* franchise increasingly being considered in a period of narrative and thematic stagnation with content from the Greek era being considered problematic by critics and its audience. Some developers are quoted as saying that for the series to continue they had to "get rid" of Kratos (Barlog cited in Gamelab Conference, 2019). However, Barlog is cited as wanting to take a character who is considered irredeemable, like Kratos, and make the audience "root for them" (Game Informer 2018). The birth of Barlog's own child, a son, led to questioning the representations his work was presenting to the next generation.

> [Kratos] was spending a lot of time out in the woods, trying to figure out how to get control of the demons inside of him — the monster inside of him that we, as his creators, allowed to be out all the time. So we are, in a large portion, were responsible for the fact that [Kratos] is the monster at all times, and now we are in turn taking our responsibility to help him balance these things. (cited in Plante, 2018)

Here Barlog references exploring Kratos' representation within the game, but also his own, and Santa Monica Studios', responsibility to their audience to address the "monster" that is toxic masculinity that their work has propagated. Barlog has referenced in several interviews (specifically addressing toxic masculinity) how he has instilled the game with messaging he is trying to pass on to his son (and by proxy, the audience) regarding masculinity.

> My dad grew up in the era of the strong silent figure. They didn't share emotions. And I'm raising my son to be OK with expressing emotions. (cited in Joho, 2018)

> Strength coexists with emotional availability and vulnerability. Life is not a Hemingway novel. We are better as people -- as a society, as a humanity -- when we are open to the concept of everyone experiencing the range of human emotions. (cited in Joho, 2018)

> [The game gives] a chance for us all to be better. (2016)

> The weight of that responsibility [of having a child] drives the instinct to protect, to want to prevent the mistakes of our past being delivered upon them. There is no end to the lengths we will go, no adversity we will not overcome, to be better… for them. (2016)

> This lesson that I hoped to pass on to [my son]: that the concepts of strength and emotional vulnerability and the ability to sort of be free to feel the range of emotions, that these are not two warring or diametrically opposed concepts. (cited in Plante, 2018)

> Honestly, if that can be taken away, if people look at [the game] and they can see there's a complexity to being a human being ... and also that there's different ways [to behave], not just the way it's been done before. (cited in Plante, 2018)

Kratos begins the 2018 game similar to how Barlog describes his own father, speaking infrequently, restricting his emotionality and desiring to present the appearance of invulnerability. However, by the end of the 2018 narrative, and through much of *Ragnarök*, Kratos reflects the messages and values Barlog is trying to teach to his own son, with examples of emotional vulnerability. One such example appears during the main narrative conclusion when Kratos and Atreus arrive at Jötunheim to spread the ashes of Atreus' mother and Kratos' wife, Faye. Upon arrival Kratos explicitly rejects much of the aforementioned dominant cultural concepts of masculinity. He foregoes his autonomy, sharing the burden of carrying the ashes with Atreus and referencing the collaborative effort and shared achievement of reaching Jötunheim.

> **Atreus:** We did it
> **Kratos:** *We* did.

This is proceeded by Kratos and Atreus spreading Faye's ashes together with Kratos acknowledging Atreus as his son, rather than referring to him by his name or "Boy" (**Kratos:** We do it together, son).

Aggression is absent also, though this could be argued due to the absence of antagonists present during this sequence. Upon arrival in Jötunheim it is revealed that Faye was a Jötunn herself, that she had prophesised and recorded what would transpire in the game's narrative and that Kratos will soon die. When revealed the player could expect Kratos to react negatively, discovering his wife had been keeping such significant secrets from him, however he responds calmly stating "I was not the only parent with secrets…", empathising with Faye rather than responding with aggression.

Kratos also rejects stoicism exhibited through demonstrations of pain and grief. Kratos states "I have nothing more to hide" before removing the dressings covering his scarred forearms sharing the constant physical pain he endures from wounds suffered when the *Blades of Chaos* were grafted to his skin prior to the 2005 game. He also grieves openly with his voice cracking as he utters "Goodbye Faye" whilst spreading her ashes.

Barlog has explicitly utilised his personal experiences with his father and as a father to shape the narrative and address the toxic masculinity Kratos had come to represent. These changes were seemingly overwhelmingly supported within Santa Monica Studios with Shannon Studhill, the studio's head, stating that the main contributing factor to the adoption of the new approach to Kratos (and the masculinity he presented) was due to the many of the developers "all having kids" and "starting their families" (cited in Game Informer, 2018). In their discussion *The Evolution of the Character of Kratos in the God of War Series* Levente Nyíri references Kratos's change in character being due to Santa Monica Studios personnel starting families as well as "societal changes" (2022, p90). It is suggested that these "societal changes" are a response to the "pre-Obama, pre-#MeToo, pre-Cancel Culture world" (Mozuch, 2020) of the early to mid-2000's when toxic masculinity was considered to be more present within western culture and society. Santa Monica Studios uses Kratos as a symbol of this era and explores his evolution through fatherhood to address their own complicity in promoting toxic masculinity through representing alternative masculinities to teach their audiences to reject toxic beliefs related to masculinity.

Mike Hume of the *Washington Post* discussed what he felt the game taught him about being a father himself, stating "I understood Kratos's concerns and demeanor" (2020). Hume expands on this, referencing he "could relate to the pressure of helping steer a child through daily dangers, never mind explaining the world as they try to wrap their minds around larger puzzles and problems they've yet to grasp" (2020). Hume highlights a trend in modern gaming demographics with 63% of gamers stated that video games helped them with problem solving (ESA, 2020, p7). Though it may not be players' initial intention for playing the game, the "dadification" present in the *God of War* franchise could be argued to transfer important messages about parenthood to the player through an interactive story. Kafai and Burke, in their 2016 text *Connected Gaming: What Making Video*

Games Can Teach Us About Learning and Literacy, stated that video games are "an unprecedented exploration of language, games, social interaction, problem solving, and self-directed activity that leads to diverse forms of learning" (pIX). Though this text mostly focuses on the uses of game-making processes in school-based learning, it is reinforced by McGonigal's 2011 *Reality is Broken*.

McGonigal references "Prosocial emotions" that are triggered during video game play. One of these emotions, "naches", is a Yiddish word conveying overwhelming pride felt at the achievements of others after providing encouragement, support and instruction (p86). McGonigal references this as "vicarious pride", an emotion directly tied to parenthood, with its etymological origins used in reference towards the achievements of one's own children. This feeling of pride can be felt when playing *God of War* as Kratos raises Atreus, with one example being the game's first chapter, *The Marked Trees* and the aforementioned hunting trip. As described Atreus is overly keen during this expedition and fails to heed Kratos' instructions, leading to his shot going awry and missing the deer.

Kratos: What are you doing? Now his guard is up. Only fire…only fire when I tell you to fire.

The pair continue tracking the deer and once found, Atreus summons his father and follows each instruction given to him before successfully shooting the animal. Atreus turns to Kratos with a wide grin to exposit "I got it" with the joy felt by Atreus being palpable by the player. The pair are then presented with a boar with golden patterns on its skin (revealed as Hildisvíni of Norse myth in *Ragnarök*). Atreus attempts to hunt it, again following his father's instructions however the boar's hide is magical causing the arrow to bounce harmlessly off it and the two continue to trail the boar. When they discover it once again and as Kratos prepares to provide his prior guidance and instruction, however Atreus stops him, raising a hand and stating "I got this" before quietly repeating his father's instructions regarding his technique and following them to the letter. This time when the arrow is loosed, it finds its mark and the wounded boar attempts to flee. This scene allows the player to invest themselves in their surrogate son, and feel this vicarious pride, seeing how instructions provided by their avatar has a tangible and successful result. Judge's performance in this moment further cements this feeling of naches, as the restrained pride can be heard in Kratos' voice ("Do not lose it") providing one of the first instances of warmth demonstrated by Kratos in the entire franchise.

As players progress through the game and experience the story they may learn about parenthood like Hume, who suggests "Kratos and Atreus had actually taught me something" (2020). Though the player sees Kratos as a father in previous entries to the franchise (*God of War* (2005) and

God of War: Chains of Olympus (2008)) these brief sequences are truncated with visual depictions of Kratos either mistakenly murdering or violently rejecting his daughter Calliope. 2018's Kratos is caring and nurturing, though in his own restrained way. Through this representation players can experience vicarious pride in Atreus and through doing so, potentially become a better parent themselves. As McGonigal states "We're finally making games that tackle real dilemmas and improve real lives" (2011, p14)

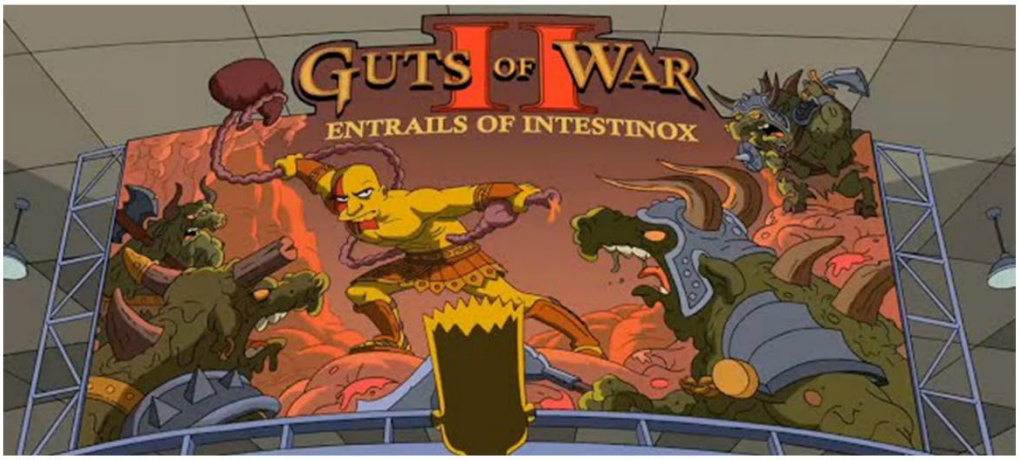
The aforementioned moment of pathos as Kratos demonstrates parental affection towards his son typifies *God of War*'s change in direction to the prior franchise, slowing the game's pace to develop a blossoming familial relationship in a medium that is frequently focused on action and quickly transitioning from set piece to set piece. Here the game takes time to develop the player's investment with the characters and gives them emotional incentives and rewards for caring for Kratos and Atreus.

2018's *God of War*, despite its emphasis on being a soft reboot, builds upon the prior entries to the franchise. The emotional beats featured within the narrative have weight, in part, due to the audience's understanding and familiarity with Kratos and how this depiction contradicts his previous representation. The *God of War* franchise has been a flagship title for *Sony* since its initial release in 2005, frequently being featured in its marketing for the PlayStation series of systems. PlayStation 3, 4 and 5 have had specifically designed *God of War* bundle editions released featuring artwork and editions of the games to engage with new players (Sony, 2013, 2018 and 2023). Kratos himself has appeared in several games outside of the franchise including titles such as *Soulcalibur: Broken Destiny* (2009), *Shovel Knight* (2014) and even *Everybody's Golf 5* (2007). He has featured in *The Simpsons* in 2011's *The Food Wife* (Episode five, season twenty-three), parodied as *Guts of War II: Entrails of Intestinox*. A commercial for *Ascension* was included in the 2013 *Superbowl* which averaged "106.6 million viewers" (Nielson, 2013). It is arguable then that with his frequent appearances, including wildly viewed sporting events, Kratos could be considered to be within the cultural zeitgeist with the public being aware of two things regarding his character, that he is very angry and that he kills things in a brutal manner.

When discussing the character of Kratos game director Cory Barlog referenced this cultural understanding of the character stating "'I know who this guy is. He's a jerk.' Right? and 'He's terrible, he's just angry all the time'" (cited in Treese, 2018). Barlog then goes on to reference his approach to Kratos' evolution in the Norse saga; "you can be strong but also have some kind of emotional availability". Barlog referenced the need for moments, like the pride exhibited in the hunting sequence, that break from the traditional sombre tone of the previous instalments, feeling these

Yacht Club Games (2014) Shovel Knight. Microsoft Windows et al. Los Angeles: Yacht Club Games

Clap Hanz (2007) Everybody's Golf 5. PlayStation 3. Yokohama: Sony Interactive Entertainment.



"The Food Wife" (2011) The Simpsons. Season 23 Episode 5. Directed by Timothy Bailey. Written by Matt Selman. Fox, 13th November.

moments should feel “genuine” and instil “a sense of hope that wasn't present in the previous franchises” (cited in Gamespot, 2018).

To see Kratos be emotionally present and supportive of a young character, however, goes against what many consider his core characteristics. This contradicts an essentialist approach, whose origins date back to circa 400 BC with Plato’s “Theory of Forms” (Popper, 2012, p36), suggesting everything has a singular unchanging form. Lakoff references it as making “the thing what it is, and without which it would be not *that* kind of thing” (1987, p197). If this were true, Kratos would only demonstrate the previous perceptions of him where he “causes anyone who comes across his path to suffer as they die, regardless if they were deserving or not” (Smith, 2021). The aforementioned hunting sequence highlighting Kratos’ support and affection (albeit often restrained) towards Atreus should exhibit more aspects of the previous, as Barlog confirms, “angry lump of muscle” (cited in Macdonald, 2018). This approach to adapting Kratos is perhaps best summarised by Brooker discussing evolving representations in adaptation wherein “the art of creation lies in assemblage, an awareness of intertextual contexts, and a contribution to boarder cultural conversation” (2012, p147). As Booker references here Santa Monica Studios have assembled elements related to the Kratos to evolve and develop the character. Familiar elements of the character are present like Kratos’ initial gruff treatment of Atreus, but this is married with the audience’s perception of Kratos (angry lump of muscle) and using it to comment upon cultural discussion, like that of Kratos’ toxic masculinity through his fatherhood.

Chapter 1:3 – Godhood and Masculinity

The 2018 game presents a Kratos that wants to improve as a father and role model to Atreus, a concept that is explored within the narrative throughout the Norse saga with the specific phrase of becoming “better”, repeated multiple times.

Chapter - The Marked Trees

Kratos: Only fire when I tell you to fire.

Atreus: I’m sorry.

Kratos: Don’t be sorry. Be better.

Chapter - The Light of Alfheim

Atreus: It should have been him. Do you hear me. Him. Not you…I don’t mean that. You know I love him. I just wish he was better. I know he can be. So if he tries, I’ll try.

Chapter - The Black Rune

Atreus: So I'm a man now, like you.

Kratos: No. We are not men. We are more than that. The responsibility is far greater. And you must be better than me. Understand? Say it.

Atreus: I will be better.

Chapter - Jotunheim in Reach

Baldur: Why... why do you even care? You could have...walked away.

Kratos: The cycle ends here. We must be better than this.

Chapter - Jotunheim in Reach

Atreus: Is this what it is to be a god? This how it always ends? Sons killing their mothers…their fathers?

Kratos: No. We will be the gods we choose to be, not those who have been. Who I was is not who you will be. We must be better.

Though these examples are not exhaustive, they highlight the game's focus on distancing oneself from toxic masculinity through becoming a "better" man. In the examples above (especially those from late game when presented with a more enlightened Kratos regarding parenthood) this "betterness" focuses upon a rejection of godhood, an aspect that could be argued the game equates with manhood and masculinity.

In the early chapters of the 2018 game, as previously discussed, Kratos keeps his and Atreus' identity as gods from his child due to believing being a god to be a "curse" (Chapter - *The Sickness*). Cory Barlog has referenced several times how "godhood for Kratos is this disease he's given to his kid" (Barlog cited in PlayStation Access, 2020), referencing how godliness manifests as anger and rage, emotions that are specifically considered as male coded (Jansz, 2010, p167). Equating godhood with toxic masculinity, referencing it as a disease, is particularly evident in the character of Atreus. During the chapter *The Sickness* it is revealed that Atreus has become unwell due to being unaware he is a god (a topic that will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 2:5 – Queering Loki and Atreus). Kratos kept this from Atreus due to him believing godhood to be "a lifetime of anguish and tragedy" (Chapter - *The Black Rune*) a belief that aligns with how maintaining the appearance of toxic masculinity is considered to be "a source of stress for many men" (Jansz, 2010, p169). Upon Atreus' recovery Kratos reveals their godhood, causing a rapid change in Atreus' behaviour. Atreus, who up this point had been presented as empathetic (Himawan *et al*, 2022, p1), softly spoken (Himawan *et*

al, 2022, p9) and benignly masculine (Conway, 2020, p956) suddenly becomes aggressive, cruel and disobedient. In his discussion on toxic masculinity Sculos summarised its traits as hyper-competitiveness, individualistic self-sufficiency, tendency towards or glorification of violence, heteronormativity, rigid conceptions of sexual/gender identity and roles and an adherence to a variety of sexist considerations of women (2017, p3). Many of these defining traits are present in Atreus' behaviour once he is aware of his godhood. He becomes competitive ("I'm a god too. I can do this" (Chapter - *Return to the Summit*)) and self-sufficient, no longer wishing to follow his father's instructions and attacking enemies as he wishes to behaviour more akin to Kratos. This also affects gameplay with Atreus no longer being controlled by the player, ignoring player button prompts (referred to as "Son Action" in gameplay controller settings) that have been established prior in the game allowing for players to direct Atreus' attacks. These actions also demonstrate a higher tendency towards violence. Prior to this chapter players can choose to not utilise Atreus in much of the fighting in the game, however, once Atreus learns of his godhood he becomes hyper aggressive in battle scenarios, removing any player choice to remove Atreus from the action. This aggression is further compounded in a cutscene later in the chapter *Return to the Summit* when the pair discover Modi, Thor's son, badly beaten by his father due to Modi's failure to kill Kratos. Here Atreus again goes against his father's wishes, killing Modi in cold blood, stabbing him in the neck and kicking him into a chasm. Atreus also demonstrates sexist behaviour, diminishing his mother's importance due to her mortality and promoting his own significance as a god. Again, in *Return to the Summit* when being admonished by Kratos for Atreus' poor treatment of non-playable character Sindri this exchange highlights Atreus' beliefs.

> **Kratos:** "It was needless and unkind"
> **Atreus:** "Truth is more important than kindness"
> **Kratos:** "Your mother would disagree"
> **Atreus:** "She wasn't a god"

Here Atreus equates compassion and kindness as mortal/feminine traits and antithetical to godhood/masculinity. This conception of superiority inherent in toxic masculinity is mirrored in much of Atreus' dialogue during this section of the game, frequently referencing how he is exempt from consequences due to being a god.

> "Were gods…we can do whatever we want, right?" (The Black Rune)
> "We go where we want, we do what we want" (Return to the Summit)

"Were gods. We can do whatever. We. Want" (Return to the Summit)

Atreus also displays elements of aggressive heteronormativity and sexual identity through the potentially homophobic behaviour towards a queer-coded character. Though not referenced as being explicitly queer, Sindri has been remarked upon by fans (Reddit, 2018) and academics as being queer-coded, or at least demonstrating a subordinate (Himawan *et al*, 2022, p7) or feminine "hybrid" masculinity (Nyíri, 2022, p88) often associated with non-heteronormative sexualities. Sindri is more effeminate in his representation than other male characters within the game, he is described through the traditionally unmasculine traits of being pretentious, uptight and fussy (Chapter - *Inside the Mountain*) and is short, slender and un-intimidating (Himawan *et al*, 2022, p7) traits often associated with queer-coded characters (Kunz & Wilde, 2023, p50).

Shortly after discovering his godhood, Atreus meets with Sindri, a character he has been on friendly terms with previously in the game. Atreus and Sindri could even be considered friends, with Atreus exclusively referencing Sindri when wanting to reveal his godhood publicly. However, when Sindri references his strained relationship with his brother Brok Atreus reacts explosively, telling Sindri to "shut up already" (Chapter - *Return to the Summit*). Atreus' treatment is seen as needlessly cruel and is remarked upon by Kratos within the narrative. This aggressive treatment and disregard of a queer-coded character in a small cast feels particularly targeted and exhibits traits associated with homophobic behaviour including "hostility, contempt and disparagement" (Serdahely & Ziemba, 1984, p110) towards perceived queer characters, further aligning Atreus' godhood with toxic masculinity.

Santa Monica Studios uses Atreus' transformation upon discovering his godhood to highlight the toxic and harmful behaviour Kratos himself exhibited in his youth in the Greek era of games. To further connect godhood equating with manhood, Atreus' transition is marked through the shared consumption of alcohol and the gifting of a weapon. During *The Black Rune* Kratos invites Atreus to share in drinking Lemnian Wine, an alcoholic beverage from the Greek island of Lemnos, to mark his ascension to godhood, not dissimilar to common real-world coming-of-age rituals for young men (Strate, 1992, p87), sharing their first beer with their father. Atreus becoming a god is also marked by the gifting of a knife, considered a Freudian phallic symbol of masculinity (Caputi, 1982, p12, Noy, 1973, p151 and Thurschwell, 2000, p37).

The examples listed above and their alignment with traits that define toxically masculinity can be argued to demonstrate a desire by the developers to teach its players to distance themselves from these behaviours. Atreus and Kratos' behaviour, when toxic, is seen as explicitly negative and provides pro-social teaching regarding parenting. It can be argued that the Norse era embeds

lessons regarding masculinity as seen in Vanden Elzen and Vanden Elzen's 2019 research into the 2018 game to study how it is able to stimulate important developmental conversations between parent and child. Participants (including young male children) explicitly reference how they disliked Atreus' behaviour during this section of the game and how they would act differently, and more compassionately, were they in his place (p173). This reference to choosing to become "better" in relation to godhood is suggestive of choosing to be better men, with Atreus, Kratos and the player distancing themselves from toxic and more dominant traditional expressions of masculinity.

"Boy."

Kratos.

Chapter 2 - Queerness in *God of War*

Before exploring the adaptation of Loki through the character of Atreus', arguing how he may be coded to represent the LGBTQIA+ community, it is first worth exploring the representations of queerness within the larger narrative of *God of War.* This will provide context for the argument explored in regarding how the game series has explored queerness both explicitly and implicitly through its characters, dialogue and themes.

As referenced in the Chapter 1:1 – Kratos and Adaptation and 1:2 – Fatherhood and Masculinity Santa Monica Studios has explicitly stated how they use their own experiences to explore content for God of War. Though this was in relation to parenthood, similar use of the developer's personal experiences can be argued to be present through the queer content within the game also. Though official diversity figures for Santa Monica Studios were not publicly available at the time of writing, its approach to diversity and inclusion has been recorded. Beyond its own mission statement referencing its diverse staff (Santa Monica Studios, 2024) Santa Monica Studio's employees have provided quantitative data related to their experiences regarding the company's diversity and inclusion via anonymous employer rating website Glassdoor (2024). These staff (stated to be from "different demographic backgrounds") provided Santa Monica Studios with a rating of 4.8 out of 5 stars for its approach to diversity and inclusion (30.8% higher than the average rating for other companies within the Media and Communication sector). The anonymous nature of Glassdoor posts is only related to public anonymity (with the details of identity provided confidentially) suggesting that the positive response by staff is accurate. Santa Monica Studios has also referenced its dedication to collaboration with promoting how "great ideas can come from anyone" (2024). This demonstrates the studio's approach to programmer Sam Handrick's request (as will be seen later in this chapter) and stating their intention to encourage contributions from all staff, promoting more diverse stories within their games. When discussing "Who We Are" Santa Monica Studios reference a sentiment that is repeated throughout their promotional materials stating that they want their staff to "feel like family" (Dela Longfish, Lead Concept Artist cited in Santa Monica Studios, 2024). From this it can be inferred that Santa Monica Studios' supportive environment and approach to encouraging staff collaboration and contribution has allowed for a greater representation within their games. One way that this representation has been expanded within the *God of War* franchise, from the Greek era to the Norse, is through the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ characters and content that could viewed as queer coded.

One exploration of wider representation is through the bisexual character Brok, a blue dwarf who assists Kratos and Atreus in their adventure. This bisexuality is referenced through incidental dialogue as Kratos and Atreus navigate the realms with stories related to male and female partners and/or objects of sexual desire. When completing the side quest *Second Hand Soul* Brok discusses a male alchemist named Andvari stating that "Just the sound of his hammer flattenin' metal were enough to stoke my fires all blissful. Shit, you better clear out a'fore I get all frisky" (Dwarven Favor - Deus Ex Malachite). In another section of the game Atreus asks why Brok and his bother Sindri are referred to as the Huldra brothers. The brothers are both are dwarves and the Huldra are a forest spirits, typically considered female and referred to as "beautiful, seductive sprites" (Mimir's tales). It is suggested the brothers acquire this moniker after some sort of sexual encounter with the female forest spirits when Mimir states "I now realise this would be a wholly inappropriate story for young and innocent ears" (*Mimir's tales*). To ensure this bisexuality was made explicit, Corey Barlog confirmed Brok's sexuality via *Twitter* two months after release (2018). Additionally, in *Ragnarök* the dwarf blacksmith Lúnda is introduced as explicitly bisexual, flirting with both Kratos and Freya throughout the story (referring to them as "beefcake" and "fine" respectively). With Brok, Lúnda and Sindri (who as previously argued is queer coded) being the only dwarfs significantly represented within the game it can be inferred that bisexuality may be a racial trait of the dwarfs, normalising non-heteronormativity as an extension of cultural identity.

Chapter 2:1 - Queerness and Family

The Norse saga of *God of War* further explores non-heteronormative narratives with *Ragnarök*'s "*Across the Realms*". In this side quest Kratos discovers "The Eternal Campfire" which burns with a rainbow-coloured flame with a meal recipe laid by the fireside. As you search for the ingredients across the realms Mimir recounts "The Tale of Jari and Somr". As Mimir explains, Jari and Somr were two human men who began travelling the nine realms of Norse mythology together, discovering rare ingredients and sharing "legendary" meals. Through these travels the two came to love each other and discovered "something unnameable" the two had sought, finding "home" in each other.

Beyond the inclusion of a narrative featuring explicitly queer characters, *Ragnarök* goes further to representing the LGBTQIA+ community as this quest is based upon real figures within Santa Monica Studios, Jake Snipes (Game Developer) and Sam Handrick (Senior Gameplay Programmer) respectively. Snipes passed away during the production of *Ragnarök* and his surviving partner and colleague, Handrick, proposed a way of immortalising his memory in game (Twitter, 2022). This was initially a suggestion of including a carving of the two's initials in the Elder Futhark

runic alphabet in the explorable environment in game. However, once it was pitched to *Ragnarök*'s director Eric Williams the concept was developed further and expanded into a full side quest, complete with collectables, an unlockable boon and exclusive dialogue incorporating aspects of Snipes and Handrick's real life to create the *Ballad of Jari and Somr*.

During the collection of the ingredients Mimir references how Jari's family's expectation was for him to "fight in the family's wars, find a wife, die for glory". Mimir continues, stating that Jari rejected these beliefs and left home due to being unable to resolve his differences his family. This dialogue was included to reflect Snipes' real experiences with his family and their contemporary heteronormative expectations, though exaggerated to fit within the themes of Norse culture the character comes from. This reflects a documented trend wherein queer individuals are at a "heightened risk of experiencing homelessness" (Morton *et al*, 2018, p20) as a result of relationship dissolution due to "parents often reject[ing] their children's LGBTQ gender and sexuality" (Reczek & Smith, 2021, p1134). Handrick has since reflected upon these themes of losing one's birth family or home stating "I wanted this story to be one many queer people know: journeying through a world that doesn't always understand you to find a place that truly feels like home. And sometimes that place is simply a person" (via Twitter, 2022). Here Handrick suggest at a core theme of *Ragnarök* specifically the concept of the found family. A "found family" or "family of choice" is where a strong familial bond is developed, often between a group of close friends, despite a lack of biological connection. This is most prominently apparent in marginalised groups, especially those from the queer community, who come to "rely extensively on the support of friends to compensate for lack of familial support" (Dewaele *et al*, 2011, p312). Much like Jari (Snipes) who found family in Somr (Handrick), the primary characters of the Norse saga of *God of War* find their own version of a found family, continuing the potential reading of the Norse era's inclusion of queer coded themes.

Throughout 2018's *God of War*, Kratos and Atreus meet a variety of characters on their adventures and develop a kinship with many. However, it is not until *Ragnarök* that these kinships develop into more familial bonds with the group cohabitating throughout much of the game. The game even uses the device of Kratos, Atreus, Mimir, Freya, Brok, Sindri and Tyr coming together to eat several family meals together, chaptering the game and providing summaries for the players regarding their completed objectives and their future goals. The concept of the found family appears in several of Santa Monica Studios' Ragnarök marketing materials, especially in the behind-the-scenes video "The Ties that Bind" (PlayStation, 2022). In the video the contributors specifically discuss the game's representation of found family and the developer's own experiences with this concept through their relationships with their coworkers. This repeats Santa Monica Studios'

Santa Monica Studios (2022) God of War Ragnarök. [Game] PlayStation 4/PlayStation 5. Santa Monica: Sony Interactive Entertainment.

Santa Monica Studios (2022) God of War Ragnarök. [Game] PlayStation 4/PlayStation 5. Santa Monica: Sony Interactive Entertainment.

approach to embedding the *God of War* games with developer life experiences, like that of fatherhood discussed in Chapter 1:1 – Kratos and Adaptation.

God of War's found family has the primary characters adopting traditional familial roles for Atreus, with Kratos as the father, Freya as the mother and Brok and Sindri as the "weird uncles" (The Ties that Bind (PlayStation, 2022)). *Ragnarök* continues to explore traditional family roles in non-traditional ways, especially in relation to the representation of men. Kratos and Mimir are seen co-parenting Atreus, living together and accepting different responsibilities regarding Atreus' upbringing. In the epilogue of the game, Atreus approaches Mimir to thank him for his support and education and refers to him as "another dad". Though Kratos' and Mimir's relationship is explicitly plutonic (referring to each as "brother") the optics of Atreus having two fathers does reflect queer families with same sex parents.

The franchise's Greek era narrative was focused on biological family (such as the significance of Kratos being the son of Zeus) and this change to exploring found family continues to differentiate this new era of *God of War* from the previous entries. Biological family remains important (2018 *God of War* explores familial bonds throughout many of its side quests and overall themes), but *Ragnarök* places much greater emphasis on the family you choose.

The Norse saga of *God of War*'s inclusion of male LGBTQIA+ characters, as well as queer related narratives and themes, demonstrates the games' exploration of non-traditional male representation. Explicitly queer Brok, Jari and Somr, queer coded Sindri, the focus on found family and Kratos and Mimir's relationship provide a wider representation of queer (or queer coded) stories than the franchise had within the Greek era and, arguably, within much of the video game medium as a whole. This is especially evident in a mainstream triple-A video game title due to reactions by the often-homophobic gaming community, as will be further explored in Chapter 3:5 – Queering Loki and Atreus.

Chapter 2:2 - The Penetrated Man

The harassment historically experienced by developers as a result of the inclusion of explicit queer themes and characters may have led to more implicit representation within the Norse era. This can be argued to be present within the game through the concept of the "penetrated man", developing upon themes present within the original myths.

In Norse mythology a specific style of magic is referenced that is considered so unmasculine that "men could not practice it without shame" (Solli, 2008, p195). This magic, named "seid", was seen as a "form of spiritual penetration" (Goodwin, 2017, p156) and inherently female or effeminately masculine, suggesting male homosexuality (Ström, 1973, p9). This magic will be

discussed further through discussing Loki's relationship with seid in Chapter 3:5 – Queering Loki and Atreus, however the larger themes within the Norse culture related to seid are arguably reflected in the game's narrative.

A man who practised seid was said to be consider "ergi" believed by researchers to be an analogue term for someone who has submissively engaged in homosexual sex or someone who has been sexually abused by other men (Solli, 2008; Richardson-Read, 2021; Çelik, 2021; Ström, 1973). This act of being sexually penetrated by another man is considered to make that person effeminate (von Schnurbein, 2000; Çelik, 2021; Kemp, 2013) and considered, as Jonathan Kemp in his 2013 book of the same name references, *The Penetrated Male*. However, it can be argued that *God of War* explores this adoption of femininity through male penetration outside of an explicitly sexual context. Several characters in the games are penetrated by phallic symbols (various bladed weapons (Caputi, 1982, p12; Noy, 1973, p151; Thurschwell, 2000, p37)) after which their character behaviours change and become more "feminine". The significance within the narrative of these penetrations is made explicit through the inclusion of scarring on the characters' bodies. The characters in question, Kratos and Thor, have had their ability to heal from all other grievous wounds explicitly depicted on screen (Kratos during 2018's chapter *The Marked Trees* and Thor during *Ragnarök*'s chapter *Surviving Fimbulwinter*). However, both characters are shown to be unable to heal fully from specific penetrative wounds.

- Kratos is impaled in the abdomen by his own hand with the Blade of Olympus during the conclusion of *God of War III* (2007).
- Kratos embeds his axe in Thor's abdomen during the opening act of *Ragnarök*.

Kratos' scarring seen in 2018's *God of War* and *Ragnarök* is a result of his self-inflicted impalement, however the scar is also present during previous games during the late Greek era. This is due to the wound replacing previous scarring incurred when Kratos' father Zeus impaled him with the same Blade of Olympus during the opening act of *God of War II* (2007). However, it appears generally accepted by the *God of War* fan community that though this wound previously existed, the one seen during the Norse era is result of his self-impalement (Smith, 2021; God of War Wiki, 2024; Reddit, 2018; GameFAQs, 2023). It is also worth referencing that Kratos has other scarring upon his body (slash across his right eye and burns where the chains of the Blades of Chaos attached to both his forearms) however these were received whilst mortal, before he was granted godly healing upon becoming the Ghost of Sparta in *God of War* (2005).

Both Kratos and Thor, once impaled, can be argued to become more feminine through their actions and dialogue. Definitively defining femininity is impossible due to the impermanent nature of identity and each individual's response to the concept however, "so called eternal traits of the

feminine character" (Klein, 1972, pVII) have been attempted to be defined by academics. These traits have been referenced as an increased emphasis on empathy, emotionality and support than what is perceived in male counterparts (Noor *et al*, 2003; Bynun cited in Allen, 2002; Klein, 1972; O'Malley cited in Puckey, 2021).

Kratos' change between the toxic Greek era to a more hybrid masculinity in the Norse era (Nyíri, 2022, p88) could be attributed to the penetration by the Blade of Olympus. From the previously discussed examples and character development throughout the Norse era Kratos does become a supportive friend and father, is explicitly more emotional and willing to demonstrate those emotions than what is seen pre-penetration (Medina, 2020; Jordan 2023).

Thor is perhaps harder to attribute this adoption of feminine characteristics due to the limited screentime he receives prior to this penetration by Kratos' axe in the opening act of *Ragnarök*. The Thor seen in this opening act embodies the toxic masculinity previously seen in Greek era Kratos, especially through the defined toxic traits focused upon violence and aggression (O'Malley cited in Puckey, 2021, p7). *God of War*'s Thor arguably closely adapts the *Edda*'s Thor who has been referenced as "macho" and the "opposite" of the effeminate and arguably queer Loki (von Schnurbein, 2000, p123). In this way Thor can be argued to reflect (or metatextually adapt) the Kratos of the Greek era. Both demonstrate hyper-aggressive approaches to situations, both are the sons of the leader of the gods, both have children who are murdered, and both share visual similarities (scarring across the right eye and abdomen). The battle between the two and their narrative similarities help to highlight the progression Kratos made during 2018's game. This battle can be argued to provide a subtextual commentary upon the franchise and the character of Kratos through making a Greek era Kratos-like figure the antagonist of *Ragnarök*. Thor relentlessly attacks and goads Kratos, commenting upon his perceived reduction in masculinity, whilst Kratos attempts to defuse the situation through discourse, only retaliating to defend himself.

Other in game representations of Thor prior to his penetration mostly appear through tales and artistic depictions of his deeds before the events of the 2018 game's narrative. Throughout *God of War* Kratos and Atreus see various shrines depicting the myths, adapted to fit within the game's narrative (normally through constructing the narratives to leave Loki absent and to make the Jötnar appear more heroic) with Mimir providing additional context. Many of these tales that feature Thor focus upon his genocide of the Jötnar and his apparent joy at the slaughter of the giants. For example, the story of the eight-armed Jötnar Starkaðr references how, despite the Jötunn's surrender, Thor severed each arm one by one until Starkaðr died of blood loss.

The acts committed by Thor in these stories arguably portray an irredeemable villain, however *Ragnarök* takes time to continue Barlog's intention with the 2018 game to redeem monstrous

characters (Game Informer 2018). After Thor's penetration his aggression appears restrained, exhibiting the aforementioned feminine traits. He becomes supportive of Atreus, providing positive feedback (regarding his fighting style and stating he is an "okay kid" (*Into the Fire*)) and saving him from death when attacked by Heimdall (*The Runaway*).

Thor also demonstrates emotionality during *Ragnarök* after his penetration, though this is explored through an attempt to reject emotions and maintain masculine stoicism (Jansz, 2010, p168). One chapter where this is present is *Unlocking the Mask* which explores Thor's issues with alcoholism. Throughout *Ragnarök* Thor is persistently humiliated by his father Odin frequently commenting upon his intelligence ("I can explain it to you, but I can't understand it for you" – *Unleashing Hel*). This, in addition to difficulties in his marriage as a result of Odin's actions, causes Thor to relapse into alcoholism. During the 2018 game Mimir frequently reference Thor's drunkenness during his genocide of the Jötnar. This is corroborated by other non-playable characters such as the spirit in the side quest *Hammer Fall* who references his mother's murder by Thor in a "drunken rage". During his relapse, Atreus and Thrúd (Thor's daughter) find him in the Asgardian pub, Black Thunder. Thrúd scolds Thor for his relapse, breaking his promises to her and Sif, Thor's wife. At the end of this confrontation Thor has the opportunity to apologise to Thrud and begin steps towards sobriety again. Instead, he comments that he "fucked up" as his voice breaks before wiping away a tear in an attempt to shield his emotions from Atreus. His relapse is stated to be as a result of perceived loss of status due to Odin's treatment of him. The emotional vulnerability he displays and then attempts to hide relates to O'Malley's loss of "status as a 'man'" in relation to the mindset of toxic masculinity (cited in Puckey, 2021, p7). This relapse appears as a result of his loss of masculine status and as a rejection of the feminine traits he has begun to exhibit, arguably because of his battle with Kratos. This loss in standing and manliness leads Thor to need to reconstruct his masculine identity through alcohol, a substance culturally entrenched with masculinity (Miller, 2014; Lemle and Mishkind, 1989; Hunt and Antin, 2017).

Despite this return to alcoholism Thor continues to demonstrate more feminine traits, as listed above, continuing to develop his connection with Atreus, supporting him (feminine) rather than attempting to compete with him (masculine) (Noor *et al*, 2003, p237). Despite his relapse into alcoholism to reassert his masculinity, violent tendencies and earlier references to wanting to do harm to Atreus he saves Atreus twice (when being strangled in a bar fight and when he falls off a cliff (*Unlocking the Mask*)). Shortly after Thor's confrontation with Thrúd, Atreus references their similarities ("half giant son of a powerful god with impossibly high expectations") with Thor then demonstrating empathy, recognising these parallels and their "similar life experience" (*Unlocking the Mask*).

This transformation of character for Thor is slow (similar to Kratos' throughout the 2018 game) with a steady build to his final confrontation with Kratos in *The Realms at War*. During the battle Thor demonstrates behaviour similar prior to his penetration, with aggression, violence and goading. However, during the battle Thor is penetrated an additional three times in his original wound, once with each of Kratos' main weapons (axe, dagger and spear). With each penetration his dialogue changes from hyper aggressive ("Fight and die!") to a more regretful tone referencing how he is fighting to protect his daughter and home ("You attack my daughter. You bring this to my home. To my family.") and how Atreus made him reconsider his perspective regarding his life ("He almost convinced me! Had me believing things could change!"). Eventually Thor is defeated, and Kratos provides him with mercy, choosing to let him live, causing Thor to state that "WE don't change. We…are destroyers". However, immediately afterwards Thor does choose to change, defying his father, dropping his hammer and not wishing to continue fighting Kratos. Several times in *Ragnarök* Thor references his enjoyment of killing ("I'll revel in killing you", *Into the Fire*) so a rejection of fighting Kratos shows that a significant change in personality has taken place. During the battle with Kratos Thor is penetrated with a variety of phallic symbols, and with each subsequent penetration Thor demonstrates fewer toxically masculine traits. His dialogue becomes less focused on hypermasculine threats and suggestions of his masculine superiority and instead focus on family and introspection. As established in Chapter 1:2 – Fatherhood and Masculinity, parenthood and exploring one's emotionality and are considered inherently female traits and through including these topics in his dialogue and reducing the hypermasculine posturing Thor can be considered to demonstrate a hybrid masculinity, similar to Kratos (Nyíri, 2022, p88), that is often equated with that of non-heteronormative sexualities.

The potential complexity of Thor's masculinity has been explored by Richardson-Read (2021) in reference to the original *Edda*s. In one tale from the *Poetic Edda*, *Thrymskvitha* (Crawford, 2015), Thor must disguise himself as the goddess Freya to trick Thrym, a Jötunn who has stolen his hammer, Mjolnir. Supported by Loki, Thor attends his own wedding to the male Thrym in the guise of a woman. He maintains this deception until his hammer is returned to him, wherein he murders all in attendance, save Loki. Richardson-Read states how the theft of Mjolnir is an emasculation of Thor (the hammer being a phallic symbol) and that dressing as Freya allows Thor to explore his queer identity. His murder of the wedding guests is a "transgender rage" (building upon the work of Susan Stryker from 2013) where hyper masculine Thor reacts violently as result of the incongruity of his heteronormative understanding of self and Æsir culture, and the complex identity construction exhibited when cross dressing (p8). Richardson-Read continues to claim that when Mjolnir is retuned during the ceremony is not a reclamation of his masculinity but instead a "violent rejection of the

pain associated with existing in a new and desired identity" (p9). If we use Richardson-Read's statement that the loss of Mjolnir in the Eddas is seen as an emasculation, Thor's willingness to drop it after his fight with Kratos is an acceptance of his inherent femininity. This willing emasculation and rejection of the symbol of his masculinity, in conjunction with the multiple penetrations, demonstrates his adoption of femininity, aligning with the beliefs of von Schnurbein, Çelik and Kemp.

Another example within the *Edda*s and the Norse saga is the penetration of Baldur, though due to the context of the penetration there is significantly less content that can be analysed due to the immediate proceeding death. In the *Edda*s Baldur is invulnerable to all threats save for mistletoe, which his mother Frigg did not collect an oath from due to it being deemed too young (Snorri, 2005, p66). Loki, upon discovering this information, fashions an arrow or spear from mistletoe and convinces the blind Hod to throw it for him, killing Baldur. This is replicated in game to a degree with Freya (Frigg is stated as pet-name given to her by Odin) casting a protective spell shielding him from all harm except from that caused by mistletoe. However, the game references how the spell also removed his ability to empathise (as referenced an explicitly considered feminine trait) creating an extreme version of Levant's masculine "restrictive emotionality" (1992).

Atreus receives mistletoe arrows from Sindri during the game and has his quiver repaired with one's arrowhead. In the concluding battle of the 2018 game Baldur punches Atreus, impaling himself upon the mistletoe arrowhead through his hand. Once penetrated the spell is broken and Baldur can feel emotions again, transferring from the stoic masculine to traits, defined earlier, as being inherently feminine. This can be further aligned with the concept of the penetrated man due to the use of mistletoe which is stated to be a representation of masculine fertility and vitality (Kanner, 1939; Nozedar, 2024; Woodland Trust, 2024) with the white berries considered representations of semen by pre-Christian pagan cultures (Nozedar, 2024; Ballard, 2023). Mistletoe's symbolic relationship with masculine fertility and testicular symbolism aids credence to the penetration of the arrow aligning with the reading of feminising Baldur and exploring queer symbolism.

Through the work of Richardson-Read, Solli and Jakobsson it can be inferred that queer characters, narratives and themes were arguably present in the original *Edda*'s. These appear predominantly subtextual, likely due to the time and culture they were written in, with modern readers recognising and extrapolating the queer content. Through analysis of these case studies the Norse era can be argued to similarly explore homosexual themes and representation without explicit in-text referencing. As Brooker references regarding adaptation, depictions of established characters through different and arguably "aberrant" approaches, such as queer readings, are part of the dialogical nature of adaptation. The reader, Brooker states, is the true constructer of a character's

representation, collaging the pieces of the cultural mosaic and introducing character complexity as they interact with a media text (2012). This reader construction will be explored further in relation to the character of Atreus, arguing for the presence of further queer representation.

"What would drive you to such mischief? Is this Loki's doing?"

Tyr.

Chapter 3: Loki

The character of Loki can be seen as a floating signifier, where a character or symbol can be argued to not have a singular meaning or representation and can, instead, be seen to provide multiple potential meanings depending on the reader's beliefs and contexts. As seen in the introduction, Loki has historically been seen as one such signifier, being read through a variety of lenses and engendering wide ranging and often contradictory beliefs. This consideration of Loki as a floating signifier supports the ability to view Atreus, as an adaptation of the character, in relation to the interpretations present in this textual analysis. This chapter will first explore Atreus through a discussion of the larger context of Loki and his previous adaptations before analysing game sequences that can be argued to exhibit queer representations and experiences. The sequences analysed will focus upon Atreus but will also include references to examples from the larger game that are similarly argued to demonstrate the queer themes. Though many prior adaptations of Loki have explored the masculinity and queerness of the character, Atreus presents a version of the character in a medium and franchise that, as previously referenced, formerly focused on representations of hyper masculinity. As such, much of the arguably queer coded content related to Atreus will be referenced to be often present subtextually, through seeding non-traditional masculine ideals and reflecting queer experiences within the narrative without explicit reference, perhaps to avoid discordance with the larger franchise narrative or avoid backlash from often homophobic video gaming community.

Chapter 3:1 – Norse Loki

Loki is a one of the core characters of Norse Mythology, working with (and often against) the Æsir, the worshipped gods amongst the Scandinavian and north Germanic pagans of the Viking Age (roughly the 9th to the 12th century). Loki was a shapeshifter, trickster and father (and mother) of monsters. Despite being depicted in the surviving manuscripts of the early records of the mythology of Norse paganism as the bringer of the end of the world (Ragnarök) Loki is one of the best known, and best loved (Garcia, 2022; Team Empire, 2020; Mohan, 2021 Ranker, 2022; White, 2022) of the figures of this pantheon. However, as briefly reflected upon in the introduction, there are many conflicting beliefs regarding the character and a vast array of interpretations that have appeared throughout art and contemporary media. These conflicting beliefs regarding Loki can be attributed to the small amount of physical or recorded evidence (the *Edda*s, the Snaptun Stone, the Gosford

Cross etc) regarding the character and the oral nature of Norse storytelling. However, it can be argued that this lack of evidence allows each generation and culture to adapt Loki to reflect contemporary concepts and issues through altering the cultural specifics (Hutcheon, 2013, p30) without creating, what could be considered, an aberrant adaptation (Brooker, 2012, p219).

However, in much of the evidence that has survived, Loki's representation is considered villainous which is antithetical to the portrayal of the heroic Atreus in *God of War*'s Norse era. Axel Olrik, in his 1909 work *Loke in the Younger Tradition*, describes how the use of the word Loki (and its variations Loke, Lokke, Låkki etc.) has been used in naming conventions in Scandinavia and northern Europe. Olrik references the word's use, mostly in relation to knots in string and rope, which has been supported by contemporary writers such as Daniel McCoy.

> Scandinavian sayings and folklore from the medieval and early modern periods speak of Loki as a knot on a thread. This can hardly be coincidental, since his mother was called Nál, "Needle," and Loki coming after Nal would be akin to the thread following the needle in sewing. (2016, p44)

A variety of generalised symbolism is associated with knots in medieval Scandinavia and wider Europe including "the perpetual coiling of cosmic energy" (Carlson, *et al*, 2010, p516), magic (Bernau, 2021, p14) and eternity (Hupfauf, 2003, p229 & p243). However, there are more explicitly negative associations with knots in art that appear during the Christian conversion period of Scandinavia, during which it is believed the *Eddas* were written. During the conversion of northern Europe in the 10th Century Viking culture willingly converted to Christianity for improved trade-based and political relationships. By the mid-11th Century most Vikings "were baptised, went to church and were buried in a Christian manner" (National Museum of Denmark, 2024). The transition to Christianity was slow, with some still holding onto the Old Way (Viking culture's term for their belief system) long into the official Christianisation of Europe. During this conversion period, Christian missionaries looked for ways to merge traditions and find analogies between the religions to ensure a more peaceful transition. Durn states how the Christian belief structure is far more "black and white" than the Norse pagan religion with "little room for a grey, ambiguous figure like Loki" (Durn, 2021). As such, Loki, the mischief associated with the character and the slaying of the "Christlike Balder" (Stanton Cawley, 1939, p315) is more closely aligned him with the Christian Devil. The monks of time were tasked with sorting "the gods into saints and devils" and due to Loki's sexually and morally ambiguous nature he was sorted into the devil category (Brown cited in Durn, 2021).

Loki's connection to the Devil and knots could explain the tied loop's explicitly negative allegories in artwork from this period, stated to symbolise "the Fall of Man, the Sacrifice, and Doomsday" (Doyle, 2018, p22). These symbolic readings suggest further association with the representation of Loki due to his role as the bringer of Ragnarök and further exemplifies the attempts to link Loki with the Christian Devil by missionaries. Knots feature prominently In *Loki is Caught and the Æsir Take Vengeance* from the *Prose Edda* where Loki's villainous acts and mocking of the Æsir leads the gods to bind him to a rock using the entrails of his son Narfi, where he "will lie bound there until Ragnarok" (Snorri, 2005, p70). Satan too is said to be bound in *Revelation 20:2-3* (New International Version, p1,248), with both Loki and Satan being released at the onset of the end of the world (Ragnarök and the Apocalypse respectively). The binding of Loki (and the frequent motif of binding "evil" creatures in Norse narratives) likely supported missionaries in the syncretisation of religions. Additionally, it has been argued that the repeated narrative function of evil creatures that are imprisoned but are destined to break free is suggestive of an inherent Jungian-style archetype (Lindow, 2001, p83), further supporting a subconscious villainising of Loki.

Further societal villainising of Loki was referenced by Olrik upon exploring the etymological origins of various plants and vegetation that carry various Northern European provincial colloquialisations featuring Loki's name. These include various types of grass (*agrostis spica venti* and *poa*) that are deemed barren as a result of "Loke's sowing" (1909, p74), which is suggested to be a mischief played upon the populace by Loki. *Agrostis spica venti* especially is dangerous to winter crops such as wheat, reducing yields due to competition for sun, water and nutrients (United States Department of Agriculture, 2016, p3). Loki's connection with fast-spreading herbaceous plants (both considered weeds) that are unviable as a crop or resource demonstrates his negative standing within Northern European culture in the ensuing centuries after Europe's Christianisation.

Adversely to this villainous and devil-like depiction of Loki, Atreus is one of the heroes of the Norse era, appearing to directly contradict traditional representations of the character from the source materials. However, physical evidence that survived the transition to Christianity and the centuries since suggests there may have been a more positive representation of Loki prior to the transition. One object that is cited as being related to the potential worship of Loki is the *Nordendorf 1 Fibulae*, a silver brooch discovered in an exhumed woman's grave from around 550 to 650CE. Inscribed upon the brooch are three names, written in the runic alphabet of Elder Futhark, Wodan (Odin), Wigiþonar (Thor) and Logaþore. The exact identity of Logaþore is a debated topic though German medieval historian Norbert Wagner believe it is Loki, due to the translation of Logaþore as 'der die Lüge Wagende' ('he who dares to lie') referencing, what is often considered, one of Loki's defining characteristics (1995, p112). Similarly, "logðor" is the Anglo-Saxon word for mischievous,

plotting and wily. The etymological and phonetic similarities between Logaþore and these Anglo-Saxon descriptive word(s) that are closely associated with the character of Loki could suggest they are the same character. Logaþore is the first name featured of the three, suggesting they were revered and perhaps part of a divine trinity "the usual number in which pagan gods appear in both ancient and early medieval German and Norse sources" (MacLeod and Mees, 2006, p18). Loki, Thor and Odin do feature as the main players in much of the *Prose Edda*, and in many of the future retellings that proceeded it with Loki being the "third major figure" of the pantheon (Byock, cited in Snorri, 2005, pxx). It is worth noting however, that though there are those that believe this connection between Logaþore and Loki, there are others who contest it. MacLeod and Mees reference that Logaþore could be "the Old German counterpart for Lodur" (2006, p18) a character who features only once in the *Poetic Edda*, specifically in *Völuspá*, and is not featured in the *Prose Edda* at all. To complicate the matter further "some scholars equate Lodurr with Loki" (Blumetti, 2019) highlighting the ongoing issue with academically exploring Norse mythology due to the sparsity of records, documents and artefacts left behind to be analysed and examined. This is then compounded by the frequent alternative spellings and names for each of the characters featured making it difficult to have a single authorial version of the myths. This lack of a single version allows for a wider representation of character and readings of character.

For example, some academics have theorised that prior to the Christian Snorri and the anonymous author of the *Poetic Edda* Loki was likely seen more positively as a helper, benefactor and narrative catalyst, being considered as a more heroic figure (Stanton Cawley, 1939; von Schnurbein, 2000) with Atreus embodying these characteristics.

- Helping Odin collect parts of the Mask of Creation.
- Empathising with and emotionally supporting Thor.
- Supporting Thrúd with her desire to become a Valkyrie.
- Completing in game narrative actions to progress the narrative (especially as a playable character in *Ragnarök*).
- Triggering the narrative events necessary for Ragnarök.

Though helping the Æsir is explored as an attempt to fulfil Atreus' true desires to stop the gods, the game's narrative depicts this decision as negatively violating lead protagonist Kratos' wishes. Additionally, many of Atreus' character choices are seen as inherently negative within *Ragnarök* such as releasing Garm from Hel, leaving against Kratos' wishes and attacking Kratos and other

members of their group in animal form, further complicating the image of Atreus as a black-and-white moralistic hero.

However, this complication of moral character has been argued to be present in the original Loki, as Olrik references through connections between Loki's name and the phenomenon of "flickering air" (p77), similar to what would be experienced by someone observing the air above a powerful heat source. This may be related to the Norse character of Logi, a Jötunn who is the personification of wildfire itself, who is pitted against Loki in an eating contest in *Gylfaginning* from the *Prose Edda* where it references "one who was called Logi [Fire]" "pit[s] himself against Loki" (Snorri, 2005, p59). The phonetic similarity between the two names may have led to medieval Norse pagans associating Loki to fire, heat and shimmering air, and this connection has endured in more recent works featuring the character. In Joanne M Harris' novel *The Gospel of Loki* (2014) the myths of the Eddas are retold in first person from Loki's perspective, where he frequently refers to himself as "wildfire". In Diana Wynne Jones' novel *Eight Days of Luke* (1975) Loki appears as a young boy with the power to control fire. Wagner's 1869 opera *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (The Ring of the Nibelung) features the character of Loge, the demigod of fire who is "an amalgam of two mythological figures: Logi and Loki. While both embody fire, the latter also personifies cunning and trickery" (Delreux, 2020). Neil Gaiman's novel *Odd and the Frost Giants* (2008) is a story set in medieval Norway where a boy called Odd encounters Loki, Thor and Odin, trapped in animal form on Midgard. Gaiman's introduction of Loki, in the form of a red fox, describes him as "red-orange, like flame" and that he "moved like a flame" (p13).

In the *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* journal, Eldar Heide (2011) compares Loki of Norse myth and Loki the Vätte, a domestic spirit who could be found in a farmstead's fireplace aiding farmers with their work and providing overall prosperity. Heide suggests that both of these Lokis are connected and likely originated from the same source, evolving into the post-Christianisation Europe folktale of Ashlad (Askeladden) from Asbjørnsen and Moe's folklore collection *Norwegian Folktales* originally published in the 19th Century (2019 edition). Heide's comparison and discussion of the fire Vätte and the folk character Ashlad references the connection to the Norse myth of Loki the Jötunn and fire/wildfire and writes how both have "beneficial and destructive activities" (2011, p63). This description of the character embodying a dichotomy of self, being both supportive and destructive, hero and villain, is an aspect of the character that can be observed in the original myths and often features in modern retellings and adaptations. This antihero nature of the character is depicted in the original texts (Byock cited in Snorri, 2005, pXX-XI) and can be represented through the elemental nature often associated with Loki and fire. This duality is present within Atreus through similar narrative elements such as the discussed complicated hero/antihero nature of Atreus (especially

within *Ragnarök*) and being both god and mortal. This duality will be further discussed later in this chapter, exploring Loki and Atreus' relationship with the representation of queer communities and embodiment of masculine and feminine traits.

Chapter 3:2 - Marvel's Loki

Despite the discussed etymological confusion and lack of definitive physical evidence Loki's notoriety has arguably transcended the original Edda source material with the character frequently appearing in media products throughout the 20th and into the 21st Century. This is likely in part to the character's depiction in Marvel Comics' range of titles and eventual inclusion within the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Initially included as a villain for Marvel Comics' *Venus* (1948-1952), depicting the life of the Roman goddess as she edits a fashion magazine in New York City whilst encountering gods and villains from a variety of pantheons. Loki appears as one such villain, appearing in issue 6 in 1949, edited by Stan Lee, attempting to spread hate "until everyone on earth hates each other" (p11). This depiction of Loki's appearance was much closer to traditional depictions of the devil in Christian art with angular features, sharpened teeth and a goatee beard. This visual connection was further developed in repeated appearances in the series with a more direct use of the colour red in his costume and horns adorning his forehead (Lee, 1951). To strengthen this connection in his first appearance in issue 6 Loki lives within an "underworld" (p9) referred to as a "kingdom of fire" (p19) similar to depictions and references to the Christian Hell with Venus referring to Loki as "The Prince of Evil" (p7), a monicker for the Devil.

This connection in representation of Loki reflecting the Christian Devil is likely influenced by the enduring cultural legacy of the Christianisation of Scandinavia and Snorri, the author of the *Prose Edda*, considered the most comprehensive view of Norse mythology (Byock cited in Snorri, 2005, pIX) and where much of our modern understanding of the myths has developed from. Snorri was a chieftain, clergyman, historian, and politician (McCoy, 2016, p21) and has been referenced to be "clearly influenced" by his own religious beliefs (Faukes, 2005, pXI) when recording the Norse myths, infusing them with Christian sensibilities. The *Prose Edda* is seen as a "synthesis" between the Old Way and Christianity (O'Donoghue, 2008, p5) and reflects how the two belief systems found a functional amalgamation during the era of conversion, seen in art works such as the *Gosforth Cross* (Anon, c. 900-950) and other surviving religious paraphernalia of the era. This evil representation of Loki endured, likely because of Snorri's religious syncretisation, with his villainous characteristics being emphasised in several adaptations such as *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, *Stargate*, *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*, *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* and Marvel.

Lee, S (editor) (1949). Venus; Goddess of Love. Issue 6. New York City: Marvel Comics. p7.

Lee, S (editor) (1951). Venus. Issue 12. New York City: Marvel Comics. Cover.

Lee, S and Leiber, L. (1962). Journey Into Mystery. Issue 85. New York City: Marvel Comics. Cover and p5.

Santa Monica Studios (2022) God of War Ragnarök. [Game] PlayStation 4/PlayStation 5. Santa Monica: Sony Interactive Entertainment.

As seen in those initial issues of *Venus* this villainous representation of Loki endured into the 20th century and just over a decade later Marvel returned to the character of Loki in 1962's *Journey into Mystery* issue 85 (Lee & Lieber) with a dramatically altered appearance. Here Loki is introduced as the *God of Mischief*, endangering the citizens of New York as revenge against Thor for imprisoning him within a tree on Asgard. This Loki adopts many of the character traits apparent in the *Eddas*, with Loki presented as cowardly, self-serving and above all "cunning" (Lee and Lieber, 1962, p2), reflecting to Wanner's 2009 paper on Loki's inherent association with metis (cunning intelligence). This Loki uses his magic to trick, hypnotise and distract Thor, escaping when it's suggested the conflict will become physical ("I must escape Thor and think up a new plan to defeat him" (p9)). This reflects stories from the *Edda*s featuring Loki which reference his self-preservation once violence has been threatened against him, such as in the story *Loki is Caught and the Æsir Take Vengeance* from the *Prose Edda*.

> "Suddenly he saw that the Æsir were only a short distance away – Odin having discovered Loki's whereabouts from Hlidskjalf. Loki jumped up and threw the net in the fire, as he dashed out to the river" (Snorri, 2005, p69)

This redesign by Jack Kirby, the issue's artists/penciller, featured a bright yellow and green colour scheme along with a helmet/crown adorned with enormous horns. This look has since become iconic and synonymous with the character with his future costumes in the Marvel Comics canon frequently being permutations upon this initial design. This appearance with large, curved horns adorning a piece of headwear has provided Loki with a unique silhouette that allows him to be easily recognisable and has even been adopted by non-Marvel affiliated artists. This includes several contemporary works outside of the comic book publishing company, such as the design of Jeffrey Alan Love's illustrations in Crossley-Holland's telling of the Norse myths (2017). Marvel's visual depiction of Loki is reflected in *Ragnarök* with Atreus entering a cave early in the game carrying a deer upon his back, silhouetted against the white of a blizzard. The silhouette created, due to the curved antlers of the deer, provides Atreus with horns similar to those of Loki's Marvel depiction. Though this could merely be an homage or easter egg, it could be a subconscious projection of the character's values by the game's visual designers (and by Kirby in his 1960s redesign).

These inclusions of horns could be attributed to Loki's continued association with the Christian Devil who is also frequently depicted with horns, though the Devil's horns are often depicted as natural and animalistic. The crescent curved horns of Marvel's Loki could additionally be seen as a seeding of the concept of Loki's duality. The collected essays *Book of Symbols: Reflections*

on Archetypal Images (Carlson, *et al*, 2010) expands upon Jung's exploration of archetypes with further focus upon imagery rather than narrative or character. In this text the authors explore the depiction of horns, especially in the style adorned upon Loki, referencing its collective unconscious connection with that of dualism. The crescent, the shape Loki's horns take, is a symbol for both femininity and masculinity (p30), explored in Chapter 2:5 – Queering Loki and Atreus when discussing the representation of Loki and Atreus' sexuality. They continue in the text referencing spiral shapes as "a cosmic symbol that may represent one or the other of several dualities" (p718) such as growth and decay. This subconscious foregrounding of duality and hosting diametrically opposed beliefs is one that reflects the Loki of Norse paganism, and his continued depiction through God and Other, man and woman, good and evil. The reading of Loki representing diametrically opposed characteristics can be attributed to the ongoing ambiguity regarding the character, as discussed in the introduction, with "almost as many opinions [about Loki] as there are scholars" (Stanton Crawley, 1939, p310). This can be, in part, due to the absence of a definitive authorial version of the myths (with the *Eddas* representing a Christian adaptation produced centuries after the conversion period).

It is this lack of a definitive author establishing a true urtext that allows for the myriad interpretations of Loki and the Norse myths seen throughout the 20th and 21st Century. Norse mythology has been argued to have developed through an "additive process" (Abram, 2011, p229), being infused with the contexts appropriate for the culture that adapts it. The lack of authorial certainty allows for producers to add to the mythos, like that *of* Santa Monica Studios who appropriate certain elements of the character of Loki whilst remaining "true" to the surviving myths through reinvention "for one's own time and place" (McCoy, 2016, p289). This frequent adaptation and appropriation of Loki allows the character to be considered to reflect the original tales whilst also generating, as Brooker references, a matrix of character. In Brooker's discussion of the character of Batman he argues that the adaptation of mythical characters develops through assemblage or mosaic of existing representations, creating "a matrix of difference and sameness, variation and familiarity" (2012, p84). Characters such as Loki are considered by Brooker as flexible and shifting figures where varying interpretations of character are always "waiting in the wings" (2012, p216), generating versions that may be considered "aberrant" to the original source material. However as Norse mythology can be considered equally flexible, as suggested by McCoy and Abram, adaptations like Atreus assemble elements from the *Edda*s, Marvel and other pop culture and artistic depictions, allowing the adaptation to remain "true" to the character of Loki.

Chapter 3:3 - Atreus

God of War (2018) introduces Atreus, the young son of Kratos, into the matrix of the character of Loki, with his identity being confirmed after spreading his mother's ashes where Atreus queries "I guess there's just one thing I don't understand… My name on the wall. The Giants called me 'Loki'?". As Daniel McCoy summarises in his book *The Viking Spirit* that "Many people who know nothing else about Norse mythology have at least heard of Loki, the wily trickster god" (2016, p42), which could be argued to be due to Marvel's inclusion of the character within their successful global film franchise (Garcia, 2022; Team Empire, 2020; Mohan, 2021). IGN's Andrew Goldfarb when discussing the revelation that Atreus is Loki with Cory Barlog, states "[I know] the Marvel Loki, which is obviously very different". The contrast between Atreus and Marvel's Loki could be argued to demonstrate the character's ability to be reinterpreted in various ways whilst still embodying the defining characteristics of Loki. Though some researchers have referenced a more positive representation of Loki pre-Christianisation, Atreus could be argued to break away from traditionally perceived negative representations associated with the character.

As referenced, there is a wealth of associations with Loki to overtly negative subtexts reinforced by the *Edda*'s and perceptions of the stories with Loki summarised by Turville-Petre as "a great liar, a perjurer and a faithless friend of Thor" (1964, p128). Turville-Petre's statement does reinforce a representation of Loki as someone who is cowardly, duplicitous and untrustworthy and though Marvel has explored the character further, demonstrating other facets of the character, they do acknowledge and embed these conceptions. Mobius in *Loki* season 1 episode 2 (*The Variant*, 2021) references his duplicity and untrustworthiness stating "Loki, I've studied almost every moment of your entire life. You've literally stabbed people in the back, like, fifty times". Atreus, conversely, is fiercely loyal and heroic, with the game deliberately depicting him stabbing people in the front (with the murder of Modi) in an attempt to separate the two adaptations. *God of War*'s director, Cory Barlog highlighted a desire to avoid what he believed were the stereotypical conventions of Loki seen in existing media. When interviewed Barlog stated that he wanted to focus Loki and Norse mythology on "the things that are not the sort of main pop-culture understandings" (cited in Gamespot, 2018), referencing Marvel's depiction and Loki's potential villainous fetishisation.

This fetishisation can be argued to be present in much of Marvel's depictions of the character throughout his over 70-year history, representing Loki as a duplicitous character whose betrayal of those around him is inevitable and as an individual consumed by self-fulfilment and self-preservation. This is present in Marvel's adaptations of the character throughout his publication history and in many other modern media adaptations of the character including *Stargate*, *Supernatural*, *The Almighty Johnsons, Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* and *Hercules: The Legendary*

Journeys (*Somewhere Over the Rainbow Bridge*, 1997). Discussing this fetishisation, specifically in reference to Marvel's portrayal, author Neil Gaiman stated, "[They] simplified Loki into a villain, and made the mythos absolutely perfect for a pre-pubescent superhero audience" (cited in Barnett, 2018). Gaiman himself has explored Loki inhabiting further shades of grey, however he often remains the villain (Mr World in *American Gods*, 2001) or, at the least, the instigator of Æsir misery (*Odd and the Frost Giants*, 2008). In Harris' *The Gospel of Loki* (2014) Loki plays the primary protagonist, depicting his perspective of the *Edda*'s tales ("This is *my* version of events" (p1)) and though he appears more heroic through the first-person perspective of the story, his acts are still depicted as villainous. These adaptations of a villainous Loki could be argued to be truer to the original *Edda*s than Atreus and other more heroic representations of the character such as *Mythical Detective Loki Ragnarok* (2003). However, Atreus can still be considered a "true" adaptation through the Norse era instead focusing its entry to the Loki matrix through an element of the original character that appears as frequently as his villainisation, his otherness.

Chapter 3:4 - Othering Loki and Atreus

After the reveal of Atreus as Loki in the concluding chapter of 2018's *God of War* much of the character's narrative focuses around his Jötunn heritage, making him unique within the narrative as the (believed) last of his kind. This othering, wherein an individual is seen as negatively different and inferior to the dominant hegemony of a particular social group, is present within the original myths and appears as an inherent element of Loki through his characterisation as a trickster god. Tricksters, as Jung attests, are often ousted from society and othered, being figures to be wary of or feared due to their difference, leading to being "deserted by [their] (evidently human) companions" (2003, p169). In Snorri's first full description of Loki (after a brief reference earlier in the *Prose Edda*) he is stated to be "counted among the Æsir" (2005, p38) but as Lindow posits, this reference to "counted among" doesn't mean he is a part of that social group (2001, p216). Loki is the son of giants, making him a Jötunn, not an Æsir with whom he spends much of his time in the original *Edda*s. This designation of being different to the gods in the tales others him, separating him from his compatriots, making him less-than and perceived as negatively different. Violent acts towards the "other" in the medieval Scandinavia has been reinforced by surviving historical recordings of the era (such as The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (Giles edited edition, 1914)). Reflecting upon the surviving records Caitlin Ellis has discussed how during the Viking Age there was "a transition from endemic, low intensity warfare to a more professionalised militarisation which led to raiding overseas" (2021, p8) with smaller, local fighting being phased out and replaced with a desire to plunder the "other". The men of Scandinavia would frequently conduct raids in Britain, attempting to capture spoils from

Christian holy buildings, before returning to their native land or creating British settlements. During these raids Daniel McCoy, in his 2016 discussions of Norse mythology, posits a potential encounter (reinforced by his collected archaeological evidence) where a young raider watches his peers "murder for no reason other than sport" (p12) with the raiders seeing the invaded foreigners as the "other". McCoy explores how Viking culture frequently promoted the idea that they were predators and their enemies prey, dehumanising their quarry and potentially moralising their actions as they demonstrated their "superior power and [fulfil] the natural order of things" (p81). This othering and dehumanisation of your enemy is frequently seen throughout the myths themselves, specifically in relation to the giant race or Jötnar. This appears within the Norse era games several times through Æsir character dialogue, such as Thor expositing statements such as "The giants were a *blight* on the Nine Realms and I revelled in every single one of their deaths" (*Into the Fire*). Thor provides further prejudice when complimenting Atreus, following the praise with "but you're still a Giant" (*Into the Fire*). Additional prejudice is present when the character of Heimdall refers to Atreus with the racially loaded moniker of "half breed" (*Unleashing Hel*), suggesting he is less-than due to his mixed-race heritage with the Jötnar.

In the myths, the Jötnar race of characters are the antagonists of the heroes of the Æsir with many of the tales depicting a Jötunn "stealing" from the Æsir, such as Thor's hammer Mjolnir while he sleeps (Thrymskvitha (The Theft of Mjollnir) (Crawford, 2015, p145)) or kidnapping a female member of the gods (*The Theft of Idunn and Her Apples* (Snorri, 2005, p81)). Jötnar are depicted as less-than throughout these tales including the Norse creation myth, wherein the world is created from the corpse of the Jötunn Ymir in *Bergelmir and the Appearance of the Second Race of Frost Giants* (Snorri, 2005, p15). No rationale is provided for why Ymir is killed except that his death provided the elements necessary to create the world, with his blood becoming the sea, his skull becoming the sky and so on. Ymir's murder is briefly explored within *Ragnarök* with Odin referencing that he had to kill the Jötunn, employing dehumanising language to rationalise the murder stating, "can you murder a landslide?" (*Unleashing Hel*).

Though Odin murders the first "giant", when male Jötunn appear in the *Edda*s they are predominantly slain by Thor with "Virtually all of Thor's myths hav[ing] to do with giantslaying" (Lindow, 2001, p287). Additionally, within the creation myth Snorri references that Ymir "was evil, as are all his descendants" (2005, p14), blanketly stating how all Jötnar are inherently malevolent. This repeated killing of a specific race deemed evil by birth and heritage is further compounded by the Jötnar often being depicted as a lower social class. The Æsir, though gods, are depicted as royalty or aristocracy whereas the Jötnar are more frequently depicted as working class. This is explored further in *God of War*'s Norse games with many Jötnar described as builders, hunters and artists.

When discussing the depiction of working-class characters in video games (as the Jötnar are depicted in *God of War*) Michael Iantorno *et al* referenced how placing such characters in "extraordinary circumstances" highlights their heroic attributes, generating positive emotions towards them (2021, p107). Here Iantorno *et al* argue how throughout the last 30 years (1991-2021) working class characters in video games have been seen as increasingly heroic when the narrative and gameplay places them within perilous situations (similar to the circumstances of the genocide of the Jötnar depicted in *God of War*). Iantorno *et al* also found that more recent games, like 2019's *Neo Cab*, included these characters as being treated as "less than human" (p93) by antagonists (often a wealthier elite social class) to further engender an empathetic connection between player and character. Though it can be difficult to attribute a social class to Atreus it is clear he is not represented as aristocracy (like the Æsir in game), living in a single room wooden cabin with two members of his family, wearing ill-fitting handmade clothes and wielding hand-me-down weaponry. There is limited opportunity to depict him as blue-collar due to the fast-paced narrative and combat based gameplay however he does perform the role of a hunter in both games. He additionally demonstrates his Jötunn artistic ability through sketching in the in-game journal depicting the enemies, allies and locations from throughout the Norse era.

In the games the Jötnar are depicted as a (mostly) peaceful race that have been the focus of a genocide perpetrated by Odin due to his envy of their powers of prophecy. The *Eddas*' tales frequently feature a focus upon racially motivated murders of the Jötnar as a "reflection of the often sordid realities of the Viking Age" (McCoy, 2016, p80). Norse culture's approach to morality has been argued to have defined their deeds, with Neil S. Price stating how Vikings believed "The outcome of our actions, our fate, is already decided and therefore does not matter" (2002, p53). Here Price references how the fatalism that features in Norse mythology and the inevitability of Ragnarök, (wherein all living and afterlife-based realms (Valhalla, Fólkvangr and Hel) will be destroyed) fostered a nihilistic approach to how the Vikings treated violence. Unlike Abrahamic religions, an individual's allocated afterlife is not determined by acts of good or evil but through "fall[ing] in battle" (Snorri, 2005, p31) encouraging acts of violence, allowing for admission to the preferable afterlife, Valhalla. This violence is contextualised in their cultural narratives through violence towards the Jötnar. Loki belongs to the Jötnar, placing him apart from the Æsir and explicitly referencing his villainous nature due to the Jötnar's perception as "evil", as stated by Snorri. If we continue to explore how *God of War* presents the Jötnar (as working class individuals) we can see how Atreus presents a version of Loki that is heroic (following Iantorno *et al* study). The changing perceptions of the working class in video games promotes Loki's positive attributes, presenting what was considered as inherently negative during the Viking era (such as his otherness) more positively.

Atreus' otherness, originally considered "evil" by virtue of birth and racial identity in the *Edda*s, now makes him unique, as the (believed) last remaining Jötnar. He also demonstrates additional uniqueness through game mechanics with the ability to change into animal form and depicted as explicitly weaker than Kratos. This fragility in a playable protagonist not often explored within the masculine power-fantasy gameplay of the franchise which is then furthered through Atreus frequently demonstrating empathy, compassion and a desire for non-violent resolutions. In other contemporary adaptations Loki is frequently seen as malevolent, duplicitous and cowardly (as seen in *Stargate*, *Supernatural*, *The Almighty Johnsons, Assassin's Creed: Valhalla* and *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys*, among others). Whereas these versions can be seen as more "pure adaptations", *God of War*'s Norse era repeatedly depicts a Loki who is arguably an appropriation of the original tales. Santa Monica Studios explicitly referenced a desire to distance the Norse era from contemporary popular culture adaptations, which frequently depict Loki who could be considered to closely reflect the representation of character seen in the *Edda*s. Atreus represents an appropriation through, as Sanders defines it, an imaginative reworking of the source material/intertext (2016, p37), enriching the character of Loki by exploring a non-traditional approach. On mythical appropriations, such as the Norse era, Sanders has described how they can be considered persistently adaptable due to their malleability to be loaded with contemporary social contexts. Atreus provides this malleability, embodying a Loki who is exploring his relationship with identity, otherness and sexuality through the lens of adolescence.

Chapter 3:5 – Queering Loki and Atreus

Atreus' othering and subsequent exploration of self illustrates the Norse saga's exploration of the themes of identity. *God of War* explores Atreus' othering beyond racial identity and into sexual and gender identity building upon many of the stories from the original *Edda*s depicting Loki's bisexuality and gender fluidity. Despite this fluidity throughout this discussion Loki has and will be referred to through the pronouns of he/him. Though this may not be the most accurate pronouns to apply, discussions of the character frequently refer to Loki as he/him, as do the *Edda*s and *God of War*.

Loki's bisexuality and gender fluidity was likely utilised in the original tales as a method of villainising the character due to the Scandinavian culture of the time considering that "there was no more despicable crime" (Turville-Petre, 1964, p129) than a non-heteronormative relationship. Loki frequently changes into a woman with some examples including *The Death of Baldr and Hermod's Ride to Hel* (Snorri, 2005, p65) and Thrymskvitha (Crawford, 2015, p145) as well as repeatedly taking the form of different animals in both their masculine and feminine forms. In one such story from the

Prose Edda, *The Master Builder From Giant Land and the Birth of Sleipnir* (Snorri, 2005, p50), a builder offers to construct the walls of Asgard within three seasons. However, in return he requests that Freyja, the goddess of love and fertility, marry him. Odin and the rest of the Æsir debate and come to the agreement to refuse the request until Loki enters and advises them further. He convinces them that the task is impossible and if they agree Freyja will remain safe and they will have a partially constructed wall for free that they can then finish off at their leisure. Loki returns to the builder and accepts with one restriction, that he completes the task in only one season, to which the builder agrees. Over the proceeding season the builder, with the help of his stallion Svaðilfari, performs superhuman acts, hewing and hauling huge stones and constructing the wall. The Æsir begin to suspect the builder's racial origins, especially as his horse, with which the stones were transported, similarly appears supernaturally strong. As the wall approaches completion, the gods meet to attribute blame and Loki, seeing his life as forfeit should the builder complete his task, devises a plan to disrupt the construction. Changing his form to that of a mare Loki lures Svaðilfari away from his duty and the two run away to the woods together leaving the builder to, unsuccessfully, attempt to complete the wall. Loki then disappears from the tale for close to a year, eventually returning with foal, the eight-legged horse Sleipnir, due to Loki having remained in female form in the intervening time and becoming a mother to Sleipnir.

This narrative depiction of gender fluidity and motherhood was likely employed as a form of humiliation for Loki in the queerphobic culture of the Vikings. In the chapter *Lokasenna* (Crawford, 2015) Loki finally pushes his luck too far, drunkenly insulting the Æsir until they vow to chain him to a rock using the entrails of his sons until Ragnarök. Odin, in an attempt to silence Loki, hints at other feminine forms that do not appear in the surviving tales stating "I know that you, for eight years, lived on the earth down below as a cow in milk, and as a woman, and you've given birth to children— I call that a pervert's way of living" (Crawford, 2015, p135). This perversion is reinforced by the most dishonourable quality a man could possess during this time, referred to as "argr", meaning unmanly, effeminate or queer (McCoy, 2016, p126). Loki's unmanliness is further explored through Thor's attempts at insulting him through frequently referring to him as a "sissy" (Crawford, 2015, p143). Viking culture's view of femininity was regressive with "'manliness' considered a much higher ideal than 'womanliness'" (McCoy, 2016, p86). The concept of Loki consciously choosing to take female form or willingly becoming a mother would have been considered transgressive and deviant (Jakobsson, 2020, p22).

Loki's ability to change gender is linked with his mastery over magic or "seid" which was seen as inherently queer. Practicing it invited a "great perversion" (Snorri, 2011, p11) and was said to bring "much ergi to those who practiced it" (Snorri cited in McCoy, 2016, p126). This maligning of

magic and shape shifting seems contradictory, as these powers are also possessed by Odin, the leader of the gods. This discrepancy is even called out by Loki, also in *Lokasenna*, referencing Odin's hypocrisy of studying seid or, as Loki refers to it, "womanly magic" (p136). However, the *Edda*s depict Odin's seid transformations differently to those of Loki. Loki physically changing his form to female and willingly entering into a sexual relationship with the stallion contrasts against Odin who merely disguises himself as female to trick, sexually assault and impregnate a princess (Lindow, 2001, p262). Where Loki physically transforms to a female form, Odin's transformation is merely a magical disguise, where he is merely "dressed as a woman" (p136), reserving his masculinity through depictions of non-consensual heterosexual sex.

It is the form of physical change (rather than merely presenting as female as Odin does), impregnation and motherhood that seems to be the defining factor in Loki's "perversion". Loki's gender fluidity in the original culture of ancient Scandinavia was seen as inherently villainous and negative, however modern westernised society is more welcoming of such narratives. Though there is still entrenched stigmatisation and prejudice to non-heteronormative communities, depictions of these groups have improved significantly during the 21st Century (though media industries remain deeply hetero-centric). In 2022, over 20% of films released by the seven main studios featured queer characters (GLAAD, 2023), an increase from 14% in 2012 (GLAAD, 2013). Though this report does not reference the types of representation offered by this 20%, it does demonstrate the studio's understanding that there is a desire for greater representation of LGBTQIA+ communities.

Loki's LGBTQIA+ background has had increased representation in more recent media products featuring the character. In the third season of *American Gods*, Mr World/Loki is portrayed by Dominique Jackson, a trans woman (January 10th - March 21st, 2021) and in the Disney+ show *Loki* Tom Hiddleston's depiction of the character has a conversation with a female incarnation of himself (Sylvie) where both discuss their bisexuality ("Lamentis", 2021). Marvel Comics in their *Young Avengers* series has Loki state "My culture doesn't really share your concept of sexual identity. There are sexual acts, that's it" (Gillen, 2014, Issue 15). Marvel has also depicted Loki in female form on several occasions, and in the *Agent of Asgard* (Ewing, 2014-15) comic series Loki transitions between male and female at will. As they change from one form (the God of Lies) to another (the Goddess of Stories) they continue the same train of thought in their conversations. Unlike Loki and Sylvie on *Disney+*, the comic's Loki (at least in more modern iterations) remains Loki, rather than a branching personality, separate from "original" male Loki. Several times throughout *Agent of Asgard* Loki states "I'm always myself" and "I'm me", paying homage to the sexuality self-acceptance messages of *La Cage aux Folles* "I Am What I Am" (1983).

Loki has often been ascribed characteristics of the queer community since his depictions in the original tales with Loki seen as “an intellectual, a thinker in a culture of fighters, a god which contrasts against the hypermasculine ideas we typically associate with Viking culture and Norse mythology” (Worthington, 2023). By the nature of his avoidance of violence and alternative masculinity Loki could be argued to be queer coded, which is then more explicitly explored through Loki’s bisexuality and gender fluidity. Artistic depictions of Loki frequently illustrate the character as being androgenous in appearance. Modern depictions that appear across user generated art websites such as *DeviantArt* seem directly influenced by Marvel Comics or Hiddleston’s portrayal of the character with slender physique, shoulder length dark hair and sharp features. However, classical art that predates Marvel’s interpretation of the character frequently follows a similar androgyny with Loki often appearing masculine in silhouette but more feminine in facial physiognomy. Such examples include Bauer’s *Loki finds Gullveig’s Heart* (1911), W.G. Collingwood’s *Loki Bound* (1908) and Eckersberg’s *Baldr Dead* (1817). Similar androgyny can be argued to be present in casting decisions for Loki in modern moving image adaptations such as Jonas Strand

Bauer, J. (1911) Loki finds Gullveigs Heart [illustration]. Unknown.

Collingwood W.G. (1908) Loki Bound [wood engraving]. Viking Club, London.

Eckersberg, C. W. (1817) Baldr Dead [oil on canvas]. Kunstakademiet, Copenhagen. Loki far left.

Gravli's portrayal in *Ragnarok*, Crispin Glover in *American Gods* and Alan Cummings in *Son of the Mask* (2005).

Though these were created long after the Norse culture had been absorbed into European Christianity, they demonstrate a lingering perception of Loki as gynandromorphic. This adds to Loki's "otherness" especially in contrast with the bearded, hypermasculine depictions of the other members of the pantheon. Though some artistic depictions include a bearded Loki (*Loki and Sigyn*, by Marten Eskil Winge (1863)) he more frequently appears clean shaven and effeminate, breaking away from traditional norms of the perception the Viking culture. Atreus follows this style of artistic depiction with a slim/slight build, a clean-shaven face, gender-neutral features and an androgenous haircut (wherein hair is present, but the ears and nape of the neck are exposed). Atreus' androgenous design reflects an appearance often associated with non-binary and gender fluid individuals, with several notable members of this community exhibiting a similar appearance to Atreus' above description (at certain points in their public career) including Emma Corrin, Elliot Page and Ruby Rose. This design for Atreus may also be employing androgynous aesthetics to highlight the concept, referenced by queer history academic Randolph Trumbach, that historically adolescent boys were perceived as in a transitional state between man and woman (1993), further visually promoting Atreus representation of Loki's gender fluidity. Due to the historical artistic depictions of the bisexual, gender fluid Loki as feminine and the androgenous design of Atreus, it could be argued that the *God of War* character is visually queer coded, adapting the non-heteronormative interpretations of the character from the Eddas.

Anthony Michael D'Agostino, professor and specialist in queer representation in comic books, attested "in order to make your way in the world, we all become tricksters" (cited in Watercutter, 2021). D'Agostino suggests that regardless of Loki's sexuality or identity, he represents the LGBTQIA+ community through his trickster nature and otherness, wherein he frequently masks his true nature behind a façade or identity to conform within a hypermasculine, heteronormative culture. D'Agostino argues that this mirrors the experience of many contemporary members of the LGBTQIA+ community, hiding their true nature, identity or sexuality for fear of prejudice and violence. Atreus' explicit LGBTQIA+ representation is arguably absent within *God of War* which may be representative of D'Agostino statement. Atreus is in hiding from the Aesir due to his heritage and his identity as the trickster god of the Norse pantheon. Hiding himself and his trickster nature can be argued to reflect his representation of the queer community.

This absence of explicit non-heteronormativity may also be rationalised due to depictions of sexuality in adolescents being often unexplored in media texts. Atreus is stated as being between 10-12 years old in *God of War* (Barlog cited in Plante, 2018) and explicitly exploring the sexuality (regardless of its placement of the spectrum of sexualities) of a child may have been deemed

Santa Monica Studios (2018) God of War. PlayStation 4. Santa Monica: Sony Interactive Entertainment.

Santa Monica Studios (2022) God of War Ragnarök. [Game] PlayStation 4/PlayStation 5. Santa Monica: Sony Interactive Entertainment.

inappropriate to include. There is also a hesitance to include queer stories within mainstream media, especially within popular (and more importantly profitable) franchises and the video game medium as a whole. The video gaming community is historically hyper-vocal regarding LGBTQIA+ representation in games and related media. Review bombing (wherein review aggregating websites are flooded with negative reviews of a product) is the current tactic of homophobic fans in an attempt to financially hurt the original product for its inclusion of wider representation. Examples of this review bombing include video games (such as 2023's *Horizon Forbidden West: Burning Shores* (Jiang, 2023)) and related media (such as *HBO*'s *The Last of Us* (Jiang, 2023)) based on the popular video game series. In 2021 David Jaffe, creator of the *God of War* series, suggested on *Twitter* (2021) that there should be greater representation of LGBTQIA+ characters in video games and that he would welcome the exploration of Atreus as queer, which was similarly met with online vitriol.

Atreus' sexuality is not explicitly explored in game, however some form of opposite sex attraction is hinted at in *Ragnarök* between Atreus and Angrboda (Loki's mistress in the original *Edda*s) though no romance is ever explicitly depicted on screen. Mimir reveals to Angrboda "I will say, you've made quite the impression on our Atreus' heart" before being curtly silenced by Kratos, wanting to maintain his son's privacy. This pseudo confirmation is the closest the game provides outside of lingering glances and suggestive dialogue between Atreus and Angrboda.

Though the game only provides suggestions of a potentially heterosexual orientation for Atreus, *God of War*'s themes and narrative devices allow for ambiguity for multiple readings of Atreus' sexuality. An initial hint of this appears during Brok's introduction in chapter *Path to the Mountain* in the early stages of the game. In this sequence Brok questions Atreus regarding his gender enquiring "You are a boy, aren'tcha?" to which Atreus remains silent. However, this silence does not appear due to shyness or embarrassment, but through an active choice to neither confirm nor deny, instead choosing not to identify himself as any gender.

Additionally, around the midpoint of 2018's narrative in the chapter *Behind the Lock* Atreus and Kratos are attacked by Modi, Thor's son. During this confrontation Modi mocks Atreus' mother and vows to kill Kratos, who is subdued with lightning. Atreus screams in anger and becomes wreathed in orange energy emanating from himself before falling unconscious. The same energy can be seen coming from Kratos as he enters his rage state shortly after as he defeats Modi. After Modi withdraws the game presents a sombre sequence where Kratos lifts the now unconscious Atreus who appears gravely unwell. During this sequence named *The Sickness* Kratos travels in near silence through much of the game's Midgard map.

It is later revealed that the sickness is a manifestation of Atreus' godhood being kept from him by Kratos, with Mimir surmising the illness as where "some conflict of the mind expresses itself

as an ailment of the body". This description is not dissimilar to individuals suffering from gender dysphoria, wherein an individual feels psychological discomfort and can become unwell due to a misalliance between their biological sex and their gender identity (NHS, 2023). Though Atreus' comatose state takes this dysphoria to the extreme, Mimir's description seemingly aligns with gender dysphoria where those affected suffer from significant distress, depression or anxiety (amongst other symptoms). The incongruity between biological sex and true gender identity effects the physical health of the individual, much like Atreus and "the sickness". Building upon the previous discussions of Kratos' toxic masculinity it could be argued that this illness is related to Atreus attempting to present as traditionally masculine. He becomes unwell several times in the game (to lesser extremes) due to Atreus attempting to mimic his father through becoming enraged and needlessly violent. This is reinforced when Freya states, "The boy's true nature, your true nature, fights within him" (*The Sickness*), suggesting how Atreus exhibiting aspects of godhood (like his father's rage ability) is an attempt to present as traditionally masculine. This presenting leads to Atreus becoming unwell and feelings of dysphoria providing a potential allegorical reading of gender incongruity.

Raewyn Connell in her 1995 book *Masculinities* references how historically non-heteronormative men are considered "feminised men" (p40) and how masculinity has been defined, not just by its characteristics, but also through the subjugation of women and non-traditional masculinities. Atreus inarguably demonstrates non-traditional masculinities as defined in Chapter 1:2 – Fatherhood and Masculinity and, as explored by Mimi Schippers in 2007 when discussing gender hegemonies, exhibits characteristics more often associated with women. When defining perceived hegemonic characteristics of women Schippers references traits that can be attributed to Atreus, especially within the 2018 game, including physical vulnerability (Atreus is frequently ill and requires protection), an inability to use violence effectively (Atreus is explicitly weaker than Kratos) and compliance (following Kratos and player instructions) (p91). Schippers additionally explores how masculinity is defined by its heterosexuality (p90) which can be argued is not explicitly present in Atreus through the narrative or his representation. Instead, he is a male character who embodies female characteristics which Schippers references as exhibiting "male femininities" (p96). These feminine men are often stigmatised and othered by men, as Atreus is throughout the game by the hypermasculine Æsir, providing further evidence for readings of LGBTQIA+ representations.

Ragnarök furthers these analogies by having Atreus struggle with identity further especially in relation to his name. At the end of 2018's *God of War* Atreus learns of his identity and heritage as Loki. This serves as part of the basis for the narrative drive of *Ragnarök* as Atreus attempts to discover "who Loki is supposed to be" (*Surviving Fimbulwinter*). This search for what it means to be

Loki leads to tension and conflict between father and son. Kratos wishes to maintain the status quo and for Atreus to remain a child stating, "I want things to be the way they were" (*The Quest for Tyr*). Atreus conversely wishes to be treated as an adult and become his true self arguing how "Wouldn't it help to understand what I'm becoming" (*Surviving Fimbulwinter*) and expresses his desire to understand what being Loki means to his destiny and identity. However, when the name Loki is used by Atreus Kratos reacts explosively.

> **Atreus:** But what if Loki going to Ironwood is the only way that-
> **Kratos:** You are Atreus. My son. And nothing more. Do you hear me?

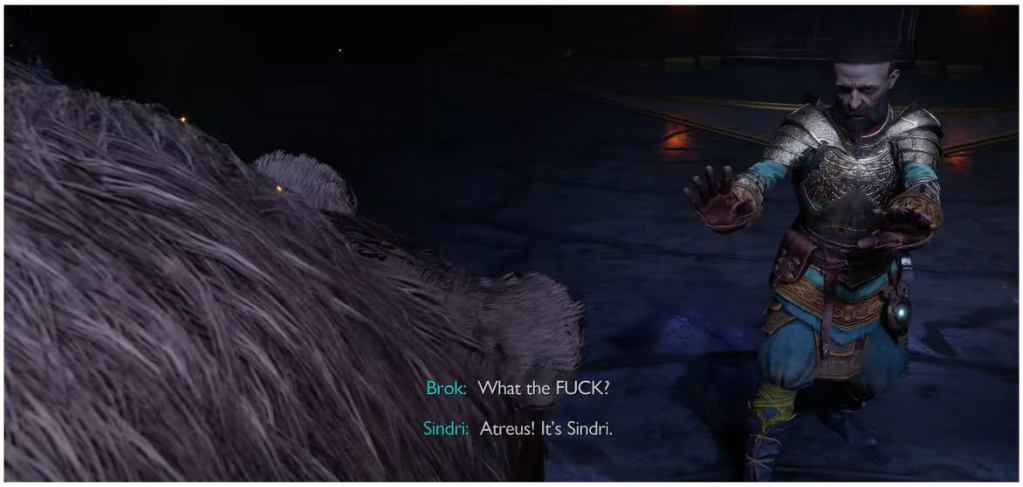
This conflict continues in the main quest *The Reckoning* where in the final cutscene the principal cast of characters come together to convince Atreus not to leave the Realm Between Realms (*Ragnarök*'s hub world) to visit Asgard. During this Kratos repeatedly refer to Atreus as "my son" and "boy" as the argument becomes more heated. In the final moments of the argument Kratos provides an ultimatum.

> You must choose who you are going to be. Are you going to continue to lie and keep things from me? Or are you my son?

This causes Atreus to physically transform himself into a bear in order to overpower the assembled group and escape.

This physical transformation, though aligning Atreus' representation more closely with the Loki of the *Eddas*, could be argued to provide further transgender or gender fluid subtexts. Atreus is repeatedly gendered as male and is forced to make a binary decision by a parental figure, with the suggestion that "choosing" to remain the "son" is the morally correct choice. It is interesting that when being forced to choose Atreus transforms into the form of a bear due to the symbolism related to this animal within *God of War*. Many promotional images preceding the games release included paganistic symbols of a bear and a wolf with the bear representing Kratos and the wolf representing Atreus (PlayStation, 2022). This was a core design tenet, referenced in the 2018 game's art book by Art Director Rafael Grassetti stating how "Throughout development, we always came back to that original bear and wolf concept" (cited in Sony Computer Entertainment & Santa Monica Studios, 2018, p52).

Atreus' decision to take the form that is intrinsically linked with his hypermasculine father could be viewed as Atreus feeling forced into adopting a traditionally heterosexual masculine role



Santa Monica Studios (2022) God of War Ragnarök. [Game] PlayStation 4/PlayStation 5. Santa Monica: Sony Interactive Entertainment.

PlayStation (2022) God of War Ragnarök Bear and Wolf Tee.

Merritt, D. (2022). Father and son. The Bear and the Wolf [oil painting] by Drew Merritt. Santa Monica Studios: Santa Monica

that his parental figure is imposing upon him. In Norse paganism the bear is connected with the berserker who were “Ferocious and feared warriors” (Byock cited in Snorri, 2005, p135) who would enter a rage filled trance, “draw[ing] upon the strength of the bear” (Jones and Pennick, 1995, p135) before entering battle wearing the skin of a bear. This description is reflective of Kratos, whose core unique game mechanic throughout the series is his ability to enter a “Rage” state and his default costume in *God of War* 2018 and *Ragnarök* is stated to be insulated with brown bear fur (Sony Computer Entertainment & Santa Monica Studios, 2018, p52; PlayStation, 2022, p10). Atreus, despite rebelling against Kratos, adheres to his request adopting a hypermasculine form that allows him to imitate his heterosexual masculine father. This could be viewed as reflecting aspects of the LGBTQIA+ experience through feeling pressured to conform one’s identity fit into a heteronormative culture (Ross, 2023).

It is suggested that Atreus’ wolf form is his connection with the identity of Loki and the Jötnar, transforming into a wolf when referred to as Loki and when visiting Jötunheim to learn about his heritage. This could be seen as Atreus exploring his queer identity through his connection with the character of Loki, traditionally represented as gender fluid and bisexual, generating dialogue with the larger matrix of the character’s representation through the significance of the wolf. In symbology the wolf is said to represent the concept of liminality and transition (Carlson, *et al*, 2010, p274) further exemplifying Atreus’ potential representation of gender fluidity and transgenderism. This is supported by dialogue within the *Ragnarök* chapter *Surviving Fimbulwinter* wherein, after transforming into animal form for the first time, Kratos confirms that the metamorphosis is triggered by Atreus’ emotions. Atreus’ ability when transforming to represent masculinity (through presenting as male) and femininity (transforming as a result of emotionality) illustrates Atreus liminal state, discovering his identity and his duality. The wolf’s connection with the Jötnar (Jötunheim is populated with wolves and the Jötnar Garm/Fenrir is depicted as a colossal wolf) generates connections with how the giants are othered, allowing the symbol of the wolf to represent marginalised othered social groups such as the queer community.

After the bear transformation Atreus is approached by Kratos and asked, “What do I call you?” (*Unleashing Hel*) referring to Atreus’ identity, potentially providing an analogy for real world deadnaming (wherein a transgender person is referred to their assigned name prior to transitioning). Rather than actively deadnaming Atreus, Kratos requests his desired name, further demonstrating his rejection of toxic masculinity (as established in Chapter 1:3 – Godhood and Masculinity as a set of characteristics that are inherently homophobic). This acceptance of Atreus as more than a single side of a binary is referenced in the following chapter of the game, with Kratos stating “You have grown

into a warrior. Worthy of your namesake" (*Reunion*), potentially metatextually referencing the gender fluid Loki.

Through these examples Atreus exhibits a Loki that has a similar syncretic approach to identity depicted in other media and the Eddas. In changing form and name at will *God of War* explores a Loki with potential analogues for contemporary identity discussions through potential character queering and inclusion of themes reflecting queer experiences. As Atreus states to Thor in *Unlocking the Mask*, supporting him with his own crisis of identity, "If you can't be yourself, you might also feel like you can't follow your own path".

"Ragnarök is here"

Freya.

Conclusion

This discussion has applied approaches to adaptation and mythology to understand how *God of War* depicts masculinity through a rejection of toxicity and representation of non-hegemonic groups. As referenced, much has been discussed regarding Kratos and his evolving relationship with masculinity (Himawan, M. R. P *et al*. 2022: Conway, 2020: Medina, 2020: Jordan, 2023: Nyíri, 2022) and this study has supported that larger discussion, analysing wider representation of non-hegemonic masculinities. This thesis posits a specific reading on the representation of characters within the *God of War* franchise and does not suggest definitive, conclusive proof of queering and non-hegemonic representation. It is believed that the case studies explored throughout this discussion provide sufficient evidence to promote the conclusions reached, though these are based upon individual textual analysis. This discussion is intended to promote a larger dialogue and academic debate regarding the characters discussed and the representation of masculinity outside of the hegemonic norm within *God of War*. As Sinfield states regarding queer readings of characters, even if this paper is considered a distortion of the characters in questions, it will raise awareness regarding the topic of queer representation as "even to misrepresent, one must present" (1992, p48).

Both characters at the heart of this discussion present as Sander's appropriations, subverting their source material to provide commentary relevant to contemporary culture. Kratos, a character entrenched in the belief structure surrounding the concept of toxic masculinity, is presented as a good father and embodies traits traditionally associated with femininity. Kratos is an adaptation of himself, appropriating the Greek era representation of his character from previous games to convey messages of the acceptance of diversity, positive fatherly behaviours and embracing identity outside of the hegemonic. Kratos references the phrase "breaking the cycle" throughout the game, referring to the cycle of patricide present in Greek mythology. Cronus is killed by Zeus and in turn, within the Greek era, Zeus is killed by Kratos. In the 2018 game it is suggested that Atreus will kill Kratos, implied by the Jötunheim petroglyph mural. However, through the narrative and representations present in the games, an additional meaning for this statement can be inferred: the breaking of the cycle of toxic masculinity. Through "breaking the cycle" the adaptation of Kratos is subverted, rejecting the revenge driven narratives present within the Greek era that exemplifies the masculine power fantasy (Dawson, 2018; Wilkowski *et al*, 2012). Instead, Norse Kratos distances himself from Greek Kratos through mercy, empathy and a desire for "justice, not vengeance" (*The Realms at*

War). Returning to Brannon's and Pukey's definitions of hegemonic and toxic masculinity, Kratos frequently rejects the messages associated with each, demonstrating emotional vulnerability, supportive collaboration and a desire to be a positive role model for his son. This rejection of hegemony and toxic behaviours comment on Kratos' source material as well as promoting values that are frequently condemned by the video game medium and its surrounding culture.

Atreus furthers these ideal through exploration of queer themes and subversion of cultural understandings of the character and the culture that originated Loki. Atreus appears as a hero of the games, subverting the antithetical villainous representations found within the *Edda*s, artistic depictions of the character and frequently in contemporary media. Within the *Edda*s and throughout his adaptation history Loki's otherness is frequently highlighted, not just through his racial heritage but also through his queerness. His bisexuality and gender fluidity appears as a defining trait of the character within his character matrix, and though this may not be depicted explicitly, Atreus represents queer identity through his characterisation and the narrative. He is a male character exhibiting culturally considered feminine traits of emotionality and empathy and has conflicts of identity that can be inferred to represent aspects of the queer experience. Through doing so Atreus honours elements of the Loki myth related to sexuality whilst also appeasing those who may rally against said representation. Through subtext Atreus can engender positive discourse regarding queer representation by allowing players to embody an avatar engaging in queer coded narrative experiences.

Loki's status as a floating signifier promotes the variety of simultaneous variants across comics, books, film, television and video games. Following the theories presented by Brooker, Atreus enters this matrix of Loki where, similar to Batman in Brooker's discussion, Loki's multiplicity and ability to be reinvented for different audiences and cultures allows the character to endure. Atreus can be considered a "true" interpretation of Loki due to his diverse placement within the matrix, adding to the representation and the cultural mosaic of the character. This can then in turn be analysed by a reader/player in a variety of ways and then reengaged within future adaptations. Through subverting aspects of the Loki myth and reflecting others closely Atreus engenders dialogue between the representations of Loki through his "difference and sameness, variation and familiarity" (Brooker, 2012, p84), furthering the character's placement within contemporary culture.

The Norse era itself is based upon the concept of subversion, avoiding Ragnarök through the rejection of prophecy and subverting its outcomes. At various points within the Norse era Kratos and Atreus are provided with a visual depiction of the events that lead to Ragnarök and Kratos' death at the hands of Thor. Both Atreus and Kratos fight against these prophecies, however it is only through compassion and empathy (historically considered feminine traits) rather than aggression, is this

outcome averted. During *The Realms at War* Odin places civilians in the line of fire to work as human shields to slow Kratos and his army. However, rather than approaching the situation aggressively and engaging in toxically masculine actions (as would likely have been explored by the Greek era Kratos) Kratos defies his previous instructions to Atreus and tells him to open his heart to the suffering of the civilians. It is this mercy that is suggested to have triggered the proceeding chain of events of further acts of compassion that subverts Kratos' fate and Ragnarök. Both Thor and Odin, the concluding "boss battles" for the series, are defeated through compassion and mercy, both being spared once defeated, providing the events necessary for Kratos' survival.

The myths themselves are subverted, adapting them to add to the larger matrix of the myths rather than providing a close adaptation of the tales. Baldur is not shot with a mistletoe arrow because of Loki's treachery but instead impales himself on an arrowhead worn by Atreus. Thor is not killed by Jörmungandr but is defeated by Kratos' axe named after the serpent. Odin is not killed by "The Wolf" and instead is defeated by Atreus, the embodiment of the symbol of the wolf. *God of War*'s ability to retain the spirit of the stories whilst also innovating and evolving the representation can be argued to demonstrate how myths are considered in flux and never definitive, with each new adaptation adding to the myth, rather than taking away (Buxton, *et al* 2020) or considered aberrant (Brooker, 2012). Video games as a medium suggest an alignment within this belief due to a game allowing for a variety of actions, playstyles and outcomes. A player may choose to complete a quest where another may not. One may choose a dialogue branch that leads to a different narrative experience to another player's. No one definitive playthrough canonises an exact series of potentially minute events of a game's narrative and a player's relationship with the narrative. Norse mythology has been referenced to be in an unfixed state, under continuous development with an inherent need for its reinvention to reflect the culture adapting it (McCoy 2016; Abram, 2011). As Guyker has discussed, videogames allow myths to "upgrade", remaining permeable and surviving through "finding new vessels for expression in culture" (Guyker, 2016, p401). Through the Norse era, *God of War* can be argued to achieve this, promoting ideals of acceptance of traditionally othered groups of non-hegemonic masculinities and queer communities through interactive media, reflecting contemporary culture. In an increasingly divisive culture regarding these topics, *God of War* explores non-hegemonic masculine communities through explicit and subtextual representations with a desire to address Santa Monica Studios prior depictions of masculinity. These embedded messages of empathy and compassion will hopefully engender similar attitudes in the wider gaming community, encouraging those who may adhere to the traits of toxic masculinity and who are inspired by the Greek era Kratos, to become "better".

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