***Mythology in Video Games***

***How it works and why it works?***

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*Abstract*—Video games are one of the popular genres of entertainment nowadays, they have a very vast group of audience and video game industry growing fast. However like any other genre it deals with narration in its base and although other factors such as graphic and sound are playing a very important roles in the game, narration as a fundamental element plays its own role. From horror stories to romantic ones video games deal with different type of narrations and one of the most popular one is mythology. These ancient type of stories are concern of this paper the study tries to explain how they find their place among game designers and players and why this specific type of narration is popular between both groups. Moreover as an example it will discuss The God OF War in relation to the same theory.

Keywords— Mythology, Narration, Video Games, Joseph Campbell, Carl Jung, God of War Franchise.

# Introduction

*"I do not want to make you a man. Men are so very frail. Men break. Men die. No, I always wished to make a God. So why not carve you to be the god of war.”*

*God of War, the game*

Using mythology in video games adding a deeper level on understanding to the game encouraging the sharp eyed player to go for an experience of a unique take on a well-known story to engage in mythology in a way that was not possible before creation of video games as it is an interactive media. There are many examples of video games either directly based on a specific mythology or a combination of different elements of various mythologies. Some of the best known examples are Until Dawn developed by supermassive game which is based on Native American mythology of Inuit and Algonquin tribes a choice and consequences interactive game which focus on cannibalism. The story is happening in the modern era but the promise of the story is directly based on the mythology of the mentioned tribes.

Another example is God of War franchise one of the most played games around the globe, this game also is based on the combination of Greek mythology and Norse mythology. It is developed by SCE Santa Monica Studio the game happens in ancient times focusing on Kratos a Spartan and a personification of might and strength in Greek mythology, who is slaying different mythical beasts. He uses different weapons in his quests which are all based on weapons used by Gods and Goddesses in Greek and Norse mythology such as Mjolnir. The games in its 2018 version happens mostly on Midgard while there are pieces of the story mentioning other nine realms, and other Gods and Goddesses such as Persephone, Odin, Hell, Loki which are all part of the story.

Video games industry is a relatively new field of technology and today world is more concern with future rather than past, meaning with the advance of technology it is more logical for game developers to choose narrations that are more modern rather than ancient so why mythology is still well running in the industry and loved by gamers? That’s the question this study tries to answer but before that it is necessary to look for the root of mythology in human societies.

# theoretical framework

## Myth and Narration in Video Games

As we are talking about games first we need to define it. Schelling define game as any interactive situation considering self-interested players. The game is a combination of players and the actions or decisions each player makes. So in a game a narration is happening while the course of the story can be limitedly be manipulated by the player. In this general definition of the game any given narration that gives the opportunity of choice to the player is a fit. But statistics shows that there is a huge difference of interest between the genres of narrations in the video games for example games with narrations in mystery genre are much more popular than the games dealing with romance in their plot. Mythology is also one of the popular choices for both game developers to design a game based on and players to play one.

The video game industry generated just shy of $135 billion in 2018 according to Newzoo in the *Year In Numbers infographic* and four games among top 20 games of the year are based on mythology. For better understanding of how much mythology based games are popular just take the example of *God of War* in its opening month the game made 131 million only on PS4 platform. But what make mythology this popular in video game industry. There are two main reasons first because of the way its narrative structure can fit game design parameters and also the fact that it is very intriguing to the human psyche.

“I would go as far to say that all literature and all entertainment are influenced by myth,” said Denis Dyack, head of Silicon Knights, the development team behind the original *Blood Omen: Legacy of Kain*, *Eternal Darkness*. “Whether people think so or not, basically, we are immersed in the mythologies in our culture. In some sense, mythology defines culture. It’s unavoidable. Any typical storyline almost always falls back to some mythology.” Video game like any other medium need a story to connect to the audience what type of narration can work better than the one already is rooted in human psyche?

As Jung statement in *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung: The structure and dynamics of the psyche* shows“In fact, the whole of mythology could be taken as a sort of projection of the collective unconscious”. (125) Mythology can be a great narration for a game on the level of gamer psyche because it is already encoded in his psyche.

But it is not the only reason, most of the characters in video gamed are architypes. Architypes in mythology as Campbell believes can be attributed to any culture no matter how much those cultures are apart so this makes myth as a narration global and without boarders another reason that makes it suitable to create a game based on it.

Players are scattered all around the world and in a matter of hours a released game in Japan can be played in Iran. This shows how much gamer’s community are connected together and why game designers need a narration that can surpass the cultural differences in a deep level. According to The *Collected Works of C.G. Jung: The structure and dynamics of the psyche* a Jungian definition of myth would be “Myths express characters and stories that are encoded into the human species in prehistory, and therefore express universal concerns.” (58). Therefore no matter if the players play *Prince of Persia* or *God of War* or *Numen* they will find the satisfaction in their game play.

From the other side myth because of its structure can be a good fit for game design. According to Epistemic game theory, decision making in games is not different from the decisions which are made in reality. As in *Decision Theory* (Peterson 2009) stated, “To choose rationally in a game is to select the “best” action in light of one’s beliefs or information.”(16)

So in decision making in the game, player tries to choose the best possible option to continue game and this decision is based on him/her system of belief and a game based on the myth is trying to impress the player to make the right decision in the light of moral or courageous line so in the end the myth and the decision a player makes based on his/her system of belief are moving in the same direction. This will give the player the satisfaction of doing the good deed if he/she made the right choice to avoid bad choices as the consequences of that a bad choice would be losing the game. The same pattern is working for the myth if you make the right choice based on the lesson mythology thought you, there will be awards but if you chose the opposite pass there would be punishment. In other words by basing a game on mythology the game developers ultimately in both psychological way and interactive level (playing the game) stimulate what a player wants.

Another aspect of game and mythology that can be explored under the same light is the aspect of entertainment while myth is trying to teach a lesson it also tries to entertain the audience and it is safe to say that one of the main purposes of a video game is to entertain the audience.

But entertainment is not the only purpose of games just like myth, games also are created to teach us something about ourselves or our society. Take the example of many games which are based on murder mysteries such as *Heavy Rain, Murdered* … while they are entertaining us they also teach us that killing is not a normal act in a human society and if you do it there will be consequences. How myth can be a very great narration for creating video games is explained. But only in narration game benefitted from myth? The answer is no. The character in game design is a very important element as the part of the game that can be controlled by the gamer and change the fate of the narration it needs to connect to the player. So what is the structure of a game character in a game based on mythology? Any myth needs a hero and there is no doubt that a game based on a myth will follow the same plan so on the next section of this paper the Joseph Campbell’s ideas on hero as an architype will be applied on *God Of War* hero *Kratos* to show an example on how mythology creates a very popular platform for video games even following a predetermined character.

# Disscution

## The Journey of Kratos

As we need heroes in our lives and myths we need heroes in our games and how they are presented are much like how they are living in mythology. The example I took here is *Kratos* the hero of *God of War* franchise. The reason for this choice is the game popularity and availability through different platforms. Players from different cultures, genders and ages fell in love with the hero of God of war through the game while they already know how the journey will go on for him basically so why they play his story?

The same reasons as the previous section can be mentioned here again but in the light of character making, Kratos is following the steps of a hero in his monomyth and monomyth appeals to our psyche as Phil Cousineau states in *On Joseph Campbells His Life and His works*:

“The journey of the hero is about the courage to seek the depths; the image of creative rebirth; the eternal cycle of change within us; the uncanny discovery that the seeker is the mystery which the seeker seeks to know. The hero journey is a symbol that binds, in the original sense of the word, two distant ideas, the spiritual quest of the ancients with the modern search for identity, always the one, shape-shifting yet marvelously constant story that we find.” (89).

Again mythology proves to be a great choice to create games based on, in any given game the narration need a hero that player can relate to and sympathize with and the archetypal hero is guaranteed this connection. But before explaining the journey of the Kratos as the hero a brief introduction to the game is needed to see how he fitted as the hero in the narration.

*God of War* is a mythology-based game classifying in action adventure genre. Created by David Jaffe for *Sony's Santa Monica Studio*, it started in 2005 and designed first exclusively for PS2 console. Because of the popularity it gained later on the studio publish it for other platforms as well.

The story is about Kratos, a Spartan warrior who is forced to murder his wife and child by his master Ares the god of war. Kratos tries to find another master to forget what he had done to his family but soon he understand it is impossible to escape from the nightmares. Even from the beginning we can see the traditional plan of myth making Gods practicing their power over their creatures. The game consist of two eras the first era is based on Greek mythology and include 7 games which I summarized above and the second era of the game include one game God of War (2018) which is based on Norse mythology telling the story of Kratos many years later when the Greek kingdom is destroyed and he has a different life and also a son called Atreus, Kratos and his son starting a journey to fulfill the last wish of his deceased wife. In this journey they encounter many obstacles and in they have to defeat giants and gods and goddesses. This game is the latest version of the franchise and that is why it is chosen here to deal with.

The journey of a hero according to narrative scholars, forms the basic template for all narrations. Joseph Campbell in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, describe it in different steps generally includes: “The call to adventure, a supernatural aide or mentor, initiation by trials and adventures, victory, and return.”(128) it is very popular way of constructing a narration.

Joseph Campbell’s starts the journey with hero living in an ordinary world. in the case of Kratos, he is living in this ordinary world just before the start of the game, in the first era of the game he already lived and adventurous life and put behind his heroic life, he is living with his wife and son and everything is normal as many years had passed since the last time he was in battle with gods, but this ordinary world soon is disturbed by the death of his wife *Faye*, her last wish is to scatter her ashes from the peak of a volcano located in the highest part of the nine realms. A wish that will make Kratos leave his peaceful life and start a new adventure. So the second step of the hero’s journey is happenning the hero is called to start an adventure.

The next step according to Campbell is refusal of the call, the player then learnes that Kratos is hiding his real life story and his true identity from his son so he is resistant to start the journey because it will endanger his secret, then he has a mysterious visitor who makes him to start this journey to fulfill the last wish of his wife.

In the story of Kratos the mentor comes to Kratos in his dreams and remind him of how he should become brave enough to share his suffering and true self with his son. The mentor here is a state of mind of Kratos rather than being an external character, which make the character more complex.

For the next step Kratos needs to face a new world that is unknown to him and he need to leave behind the comfortable world he knows. he goes to Midgard and meets, Jörmungandr the Serpent, so he also encounter unknown creatures. In this unknown world he needs to fight with enemies and overcome different obstacles, for example he arrives at the Nine river and to pass the peak of Midgard, he needs first to pass a mist that only can be vanished by Light of Alfheim, so he starts the battle to gain the light travelling to Alfheim with the help of the witch of the woods. He completed the step of passing the threshold and facing enemies. As a hero he fights with those who are in his way to his aim and survives the persuasions he should face in his way. In the narration Baldur and the story of his defeat is mentioned although it is not exactly the same as what is told in Norse mythology it has many similar elements such as Baldur death by a mistletoe arrow and the fact that his mom spell a cast of immortality on him that can only brolken by that arrow.

On the next step of his heroic journey he faces the dangers that he has never been faced before experiencing near death situations. For example for passing from one world to another to gain the power to go to other realms, he needs to be killed by cutting his head and then resurrected to life by a witch, he here faces his heroic dilemma as he doesn’t trust the witch to bring him back to life but also he has no other choice. He overcome his fear and goes to Helheim. This great danger or in Campbell’s word Ordeal moves him from one step to another.

As the result of his sacrifice, it’s time for the hero to gain his reward and in the case of Kratos he reaches his aim and can scatter his wife’s ashes according to her wish. He does it on a temple that has another twist for him. The journey is not yet complete as he face another step, it is time for him to face his reality and show his true self to his son as in the temple he scatter his wife ashes, he saw that all his story up to the moment is written by Gods and he has no way left but to overcome his fear of his true self. So he tells his story to his son. With this act he reborn as a hero who not only physically reached his aim but spiritually went through a journey and comes back home with his son to go back to his ordinary world as a changed man.

According to Campbell the journey has ended and the hero should be freed to live his life. But the game needs an open ending so other sequels can be produced, for this reason at the end of the game Thor came to Kratos to share with him the news Ragnarok happening soon as the results of his action through his journey like killing the Baldur with the mistletoe arrow. The player then while is fulfilled the journey of Kratos given a fore shadowing for the next installment in the Franchise. Just like mythology even when we have an ending to a Mythological system always there are a hope a new beginning at the end because the cycle of myth making needs continuation to keep its followers or believers in order.

# Conclusion

This paper tried to explain why mythology despite of being far from our time is still a great fit for creating narration for video games. How it still can compete with the newer genres of literature such as science fiction and fantasy and how the journey of a hero according to Joseph Campbell ideas can be applied to the hero of God of War Kratos as an example. Because of the roots of myth in the mind of humans and how it is encoded in our collective consciousness it can surpass the boarders making a genre that works beyond age and culture, a genre that everybody can relate to.

Video game industry is an international industry and in the age of technology the speed of spreading games around the world is very fast so game designers by using mythology as their frame work tries to reach as many as gamers possible around the globe because the system of myth making showed that trough the time it can survive and connect to human psyche in a very deep level.

Also in the era of declining morality we still need guidance but technology winning fast over the usual way of gaining knowledge like reading a book the new generations are more interested in video games rather than books or movies because they can have a level of interactivity that is not possible in other medias, more than that video games by involving all our senses makes us sank deeper into the story and consequently make it more influential. Myth probably from the beginning of the time was a means of educating and enlightening so it still does its job even if the orality of it changed in to interactivity in video games.

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