

Mythic Alternatives: Mythological Mechanics Beyond Violence

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Keywords

mythology, mechanics, hegemony, counter-hegemony, violence

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

To adapt Chapman et al.'s (2017) definition of historical video games, mythological video games are “games that in some way represent myth, mythology, mythologies, or relate to discourses about them” (Vandewalle 2026, 7). Such games have recently received increased scholarly attention, from Ford's (2025) “mytholudic” analysis of video games to several conferences that analyzed games as important influences on how mythology appears in contemporary culture. Simultaneously, mythological games such as *Hades* (2020, Supergiant Games), *God of War Ragnarök* (2022, Santa Monica Studio) or *Black Myth: Wukong* (2024, Game Science) frequently rank among the most acclaimed in the industry.

As others have remarked regarding historical games (e.g., Serrano Lozano 2020), the dominant type of action in mythological games relies on mechanics of violence, from sword-slashing to axe-throwing, arrow-firing, spear-stabbing, monster-slaying, and more. Mythological violence recurs not only in the aforementioned blockbuster titles, but also in smaller projects like *Tales of Kenzera: Zau* (2024, Surgent Studios), *South of Midnight* (2025, Compulsion Games), or *Moon Hunters* (2016, Kitfox Games). This reliance on violence as a ‘default’ mythological mechanic is in line with broader tendencies towards combat in mainstream gaming (King & Krzywinska 2006), as well as with many myths themselves. Like games, myths are full of violent episodes, from the ‘battle books’ of the *Iliad* to the cyclical violence of divine succession myths (e.g., Ouranos–Kronos–Zeus in the *Theogony*, and parallel stories from Hittite and Hurrian traditions), or the stories of heroes like Gilgamesh or Cú Chulainn. While recent titles have started to question violence (e.g., *Senua's Saga: Hellblade II*; 2024, Ninja Theory)

Proceedings of DiGRA 2026

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or avoid it altogether (*Mythwrecked: Ambrosia Island*; 2024, Polygon Treehouse), violence thus remains highly pervasive in ludic mythologies.

This hegemonic emphasis on combat raises the question of how mythological stories could be translated to video games in alternative ways. How can games model non-violent aspects of mythic narratives? How do such features translate to particular game mechanics? Are mythological games ‘just’ violence, or are there additional methods of telling ‘authentically’ mythological stories in the medium? In other words, how can games utilize their inherent mechanics – their agential building blocks (Sicart 2008) or “verbs” (Crawford 2003, 265) – to explore mythological story forms in new, counter-hegemonic ways? This presentation seeks to identify how existing game mechanics model mythic motifs beyond combat and violence, to explore how video games can inform about previously underrepresented aspects of mythology and diversify their means of meaning-making.

In particular, this presentation surveys the following mechanics:

- *Mechanics of metamorphosis.* Bodily transformations recur prominently across world mythologies, illustrated by Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and characters with shapeshifting capabilities (e.g., Loki, Maui). Caracciolo (2025) has previously explored how mythological games incorporate metamorphosis as a mechanic, from ‘soul-jumping’ in the New Caledonian folklore game *Tchia* (2023, Awaceb) to Atreus’/Loki’s metamorphoses in various animals in *God of War Ragnarök*. Other examples include the transformations of Sun Wukong in *Smite* (2014–present, Titan Forge Games) and *Black Myth: Wukong*, inspired by the Monkey King’s shapeshifting in Chinese mythology.
- *Mechanics of heroism.* Heroes are a common archetype in myths around the world (Taylor 2015), evidenced by characters like Gilgamesh, Rostam, Heracles, or Beowulf. *Warriors: Legends of Troy* (2011, Koei Canada) replaces the conventional combo meter with a ‘kleos meter’ (using the Greek word for fame, glory), drawing attention to the glorious existence of Homeric heroes like Achilles or Ajax. *A Total War Saga: Troy* (2020, Creative Assembly) allows its heroes to engage in temporary moments of heightened capabilities called *aristeiai*, named after conventional episodes in Greco-Roman epic where a hero’s extraordinary feats are described at length. These mechanics simulate the spectacular ontology and the social function of the hero as an exceptional, exemplary individual.
- *Mechanics of extraordinary movement.* Long recognized as a spatial medium (Murray 1997; Aarseth & Günzel 2019), video games frequently foreground movement, exploration, or wandering as key gameplay features (Kagen 2022). Myths often depict characters capable of traversing incredibly large spaces in short timeframes, like the Norse squirrel Ratatoskr who delivers messages across Yggdrasil. In *Smite*, Hermes/Mercury can cross the game space quasi-instantaneously, recalling his messenger role in Greek myth. In the final chapter of *Black Myth: Wukong*, players acquire the ‘Somersault Cloud’ spell, referencing Sun Wukong’s ability to somersault 108,000 *li* at once in *Journey to the West*.
- *Mechanics of dying and rising.* The cycle of death and rebirth, or ‘dying and rising’ (Frazer 1890), is frequently thematized in myths: stories about Osiris,

Ishtar, or the Orphic Dionysus all feature the death of a divine character, followed by efforts to resurrect the god. Very much aware of Orphic Dionysus (Cameron 2024), *Hades* received critical acclaim for its seamless ludonarrative integration of character death, where dying and rising moves the story forward rather than resetting it. *Herc's Adventures* (1997, Big Ape Productions & LucasArts) is another example, where if the player-character dies, the player has to escape the Greek Underworld. The more they die, the further down they respawn, thus making dying and rising a core concern of the game.

- *Mechanics between gods and mortals.* Various mythologies have mortals interact with deities, through conversation, prayer, apparition, and more. The strategy game *Age of Mythology* (2002, Ensemble Studios) has players build shrines to deities who grant them special abilities (McMenomy 2015), thematizing the distance between, but also the interdependence of gods and mortals. Similarly, the Egyptian mythology VR game *Asgard's Wrath 2* (2023, Sanzaru Games) asks players to switch perspectives between an unnamed deity and several mortal heroes, frequently requiring both embodied characters to collaborate in puzzle-solving.

While not each of these mechanics can be completely untangled from violence – Monkey's transformations and the *aristeiai* are used in combat, for instance – they nevertheless illustrate how mythological motifs beyond weapon-wielding can translate into mechanics of gameplay. As such, this presentation contributes to the growing field of mythological game studies by scrutinizing alternatives to dominant ludonarrative forms of mythological storytelling, and by exploring how the contemporary vocabulary of cultural expression in games can be expanded.

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