

What Is This Skítr? : Viking Authenticity in *Ys X: Nordics* as a Japanese Role-Playing Game 『Ys X: Nordics』におけるヴァイキングの真正性—日本のロールプレイング ゲームとしての再文脈化

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Abstract

This article explores how viking authenticity is filtered through the media ecology of Japan by employing *Ys X: Nordics* (Nihon Falcom 2023) as a case study. It examines how the game constructs and engages with historical imaginaries while simultaneously being shaped by conventions and sensibilities of Japanese game development and its broader media landscape. To address this, the discussion situates *Ys X* within the broader history of viking representation in video games, showing how the figure of the “digital viking” has been recontextualized to meet diverse cultural and commercial demands. Particular attention is then paid to how the national and production context of *Ys X* inform its representations, with the game blending viking motifs with the visual, narrative, and thematic conventions of anime, manga, and Japanese role-playing games. Through close analysis, the article identifies moments of what can be termed *authentic recontextualization*, while also being mindful of numerous decontextualized or ornamental uses of viking imagery, names, and mythological figures. These strategies produce a selectively authentic, viking-inflected world that resonates with audience expectations while eschewing historical authenticity. Moreover, the game’s tonal orientation diverges from the “gritty” medievalism common in contemporary Western media, favoring instead the colorful optimism and narrative ethos of mainstream manga and anime, with its emphasis on friendship, perseverance, and collective victory. Ultimately, the article argues that *Ys X* exemplifies how Japanese popular media reworks transnational historical motifs, embedding them within its own aesthetic and narrative logics. In doing so, it highlights the culturally contingent nature of authenticity in historical games, showing that viking imagery in Japanese contexts functions less as a claim to historical accuracy than as an adaptive, stylistic device within a global media landscape.

要旨

本稿は、日本のメディア生態系を通していかにヴァイキングの真正性が媒介されるのかを、事例研究として『Ys X: Nordics』（日本ファルコム、2023年）を用いて検討するものである。具体的には、本作がいかに歴史的想像力を構築し関与しているのかを分析すると同時に、日本のゲーム開発慣習およびより広範なメディア環境の感性によってどのように形作られているのかを明らかにする。そのためにまず、『Ys X』をビデオゲームにおけるヴァイキング表象の歴史的文脈の中に位置づけ、「デジタル・ヴァイキング」という像が多様な文化的・商業的要請に応じて再文脈化されてきた過程を示す。続いて、本作の国民的・制作的コンテクストがその表象に与える影響に着目し、ヴァイキング的モチーフがアニメ、マンガ、日本製ロールプレイングゲームに特有の視覚的・物語的・主題的慣習とどのように融合しているかを検討する。精緻な分析を通じて、本稿は「真正的再文脈化」と呼び得る局面を指摘する一方で、ヴァイキングの意匠、名称、神話的存在が脱文脈的あるいは装飾的に用いられている数多くの事例にも注意を払う。これらの戦略は、歴史的真正性を志向するのではなく、受容者の期待に応答する選択的に真正化された、ヴァイキング風の世界を生成している。さらに本作のトーンは、

現代西洋メディアに典型的な「重厚で陰鬱な」中世主義とは異なり、友情・忍耐・協働による勝利を重視する主流マンガ／アニメの物語倫理と、色彩豊かな楽観主義を志向している。以上を踏まえ、本稿は『Ys X』がいかに日本の大衆メディアにおいてトランスナショナルな歴史的モチーフを再編成し、独自の美学的・物語的論理の中へと埋め込んでいるかを論じる。最終的に、本研究は歴史ゲームにおける真正性が文化的に条件づけられた概念であることを示し、日本的文脈におけるヴァイキング表象が歴史的正確性の主張というよりも、グローバルなメディア環境における適応的かつ様式的装置として機能していることを明らかにする。

1 Introduction

“Skítr,” she curses—invoking the Old Norse term for “shit” as if it were seamlessly interchangeable with its modern English equivalent.¹ Meanwhile, her name, Karja, evokes a faintly viking sensibility, reinforced by her viking-inspired weaponry and armor, most notably her helmet. Yet, this impression is complicated by her overtly anime-inspired character design, which filters these elements through the lens of Japanese popular culture. Consequently, Karja exemplifies how *Ys X: Nordics* (Nihon Falcom 2023), the Japanese role-playing game from which she hails, selectively draws on the history and image of the vikings to create its fictional setting and narrative. In doing so, it provides an opportunity for critical reflection, not only regarding historical authenticity—particularly as related to the vikings—but also the broader criteria by which such authenticity is ultimately defined and evaluated across cultural boundaries.

While players may assess historical authenticity in video games based on perceived adherence to real-world facts (Burgess & Jones 2022), scholars within historical game studies have increasingly shifted attention toward a more dynamic interpretation (Donald & Reid 2023). Rather than focusing exclusively on the verisimilitude of historical games, this scholarly reframing emphasizes how historical representations interact with player expectations in a broader context—acknowledging how games build on and contribute to historical perspectives without necessarily appealing to historical accuracy (Kapell & Elliott 2013; Chapman 2016; Chapman et al. 2017; see also Houghton 2022). Here, authenticity is reframed not as an empirical benchmark, but as a culturally contingent process negotiated between game texts, their creators, and diverse audiences. In doing so, it establishes a heuristic for

understanding how games construct immersive and plausible representations of the past, even when historical elements are decontextualized and reanchored in fictional or fantastical settings (Chapman 2016, 179; see also Wolterink 2017, Zimmermann 2021, Grufstedt 2022, and McCall 2023).

To further accommodate such concerns, this article proposes the term *authentic recontextualization* to describe instances in which decontextualized elements are integrated coherently into a new setting, enabling players to form meaningful associations with the historical references being invoked. In the case of viking authenticity, such integration may either align with established conventions of viking representation or establish meaningful connections to Viking Age and medieval history.

These meanings draw upon—and in some cases reshape—players’ subjective perceptions of the past, and are further complicated by differing levels of subject familiarity. Such differences generate diverse expectations that may be affirmed or unsettled by the representations encountered in play, revealing authenticity to be as much a product of reception as of design (de Groot 2016, 8–9; Politopoulos et al., 2019). What emerges, in turn, is a dynamic spectrum of opportunities for authentic recontextualization shaped by the discourse between players, games, and developers.

For instance, Karja’s use of “skítr” may be received by some as a compelling nod to Old Norse vernacular, which reinforces the game’s historical authenticity. However, for players with greater familiarity with the term’s historical or linguistic context, its usage may instead appear as an alienating insertion which undermines the coherence of the game’s historical representation, given that “skítr” is not used as an expletive in the same way “shit” is in modern

¹ This article uses “Old Norse” to refer to the historical, linguistic, and literary sources (mainly of medieval Iceland, in the latter case), while “viking” here is used as an umbrella term for the popular reception of

this material and the history of ideas and images of the vikings. “Viking Age,” capitalized thusly, only refers to the historical period, roughly 793–1066 AD.

English (Árnastofnun, n.d.). Such discrepancies underscore the need to consider how “vikings” are mediated in cultural contexts that lack direct or intimate familiarity with the historical source material—Japan being one pertinent case.

As a recent Japanese role-playing game that engages with viking themes, *Ys X: Nordics* (hereafter *Ys X*) offers a productive case study for analyzing the cross-cultural construction of viking authenticity. As its title suggests, *Ys X* is the tenth mainline installment in Nihon Falcom’s long-running *Ys* series, which debuted in 1987. The franchise follows the recurring protagonist Adol Christin, whose adventures transport him to fantastical locales, many of which loosely draw on real-world cultures. These cultural references, however, are consistently mediated through the conventions of high fantasy and integrated into the franchise’s internally coherent mythos, functioning more as aesthetic or thematic motifs than as historically rigorous reconstructions. In this context, *Ys X* stands out as the series’ most explicit engagement with a specific historical and cultural entity, as its title directly invokes a real-world geographical and cultural region—the Nordics—without any recourse to the thinly veiled fictionalized analogues that typically characterize the series.

Accordingly, by analyzing *Ys X* as a case study, this article seeks to contribute to the current discourse within historical game studies—and Japanese game studies more broadly—by assessing viking authenticity as it is filtered through the Japanese media landscape. However, as the ensuing analysis will demonstrate, *Ys X* primarily incorporates viking-inspired content in ways that reflect genre expectations related to Japanese role-playing games and localized practices of cultural production as opposed to the authentic recontextualization of viking signifiers.

The resulting mode of authenticity operates not through adherence to historical reconstruction, but through a strategically curated aesthetic that aligns with audience expectations. Within this framework, neither historical accuracy nor a sustained commitment to historical authenticity constitutes a primary objective. Instead, viking representations are selectively deployed as stylistic and thematic devices—ones that resonate with players accustomed to the genre conventions of Japanese popular media, for whom strict historical fidelity is neither expected

nor required. Consequently, the game largely forgoes the authentic recontextualization required to construct a coherently viking experience, ultimately favoring genre adherence over historical resonance.

2 Vikings in Video Games

The vikings have long cast a powerful spell, leaving their mark on fantasy literature, films, television, video games, crafts, reenactments, and much more. From Tolkien’s Middle-Earth to Marvel’s Asgard, the myths, warriors, and gods of the medieval North, most often associated with the vikings, have been endlessly reshaped to suit new stories and new audiences (see Jón Karl Helgason 2017 and O’Donoghue 2024). As these representations proliferate, so too do questions surrounding their authenticity, particularly as recurring signifiers associated with vikings are reiterated, recontextualized, and transformed—contributing to the formation of new tropes and stereotypes surrounding “medievalness” and “vikingness.”

The use of vikings as subjects of digital games goes back to the 1980s, predating the advent of visual computer graphics with text-based games like the simply titled *Viking* (1982), a resource management game (see Coojimans 2023). The following decades saw a relatively consistent yet low output of games either about or featuring vikings or Old Norse mythology. From the early 2010s onward, however, vikings have come to occupy a prominent position within the popular entertainment industries of the West.² In particular, 2011 can be seen as a watershed year due to the release of the first Marvel *Thor* movie adaptation, the first season of *Game of Thrones*, which adapted George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* medieval fantasy books, and *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, the fifth installment of the gold-standard RPG series *The Elder Scrolls* (1994–). In the wake of this resurgence of vikings, long-running, popular game series have made viking-themed entries in order to capitalize on the trend, as seen in the cases of *God of War* (2018), *Assassin’s Creed: Valhalla* (2020), and *God of War: Ragnarök* (2022). Considering this trend, it is also possible to consider *Ys X* as one such timely serial entry.

² The authors use “West” and “Western” as discursive shorthand for Western Europe, the United Kingdom, and North America, here mainly to describe the common reception history and strategies of portraying

vikings and Norse mythology, which brush up against recognized genre terms such as “western fantasy.”

Throughout these decades, the characterization and iconography of digital vikings have remained largely consistent with their portrayal outside of games: violent, hypermasculine, often drunk, white, yet freedom-loving, daring, courageous, adventurous, and dangerously alluring (cf. Wawn 2000, 4). At times, they are made to be bumbling and comedic in their single-minded commitment to beer (or mead) and battle. Their unofficial tagline of “rape and pillage” was unpacked by British comedian David Mitchell in 2009: “Add ‘pillage’ to ‘rape’, and suddenly it has a certain air of knockabout fun. [...] put them together, and these two awful crimes apparently cancel each other out!” As the sketch goes on, Mitchell draws attention to the real suffering of the historical victims of viking raids, and how the determining factor which separates atrocity from comedy is, apparently, enough time—in this case, a millennium. His ultimate point, of course, is that it is not comedic in the least, and rather, it is the vagaries of historiography that have led us to cartoonize what was, in Mitchell’s words, “a terrorist insurgency.” It is not merely the passage of time but what takes place in those intervening years, namely the long and circuitous path of the historical reception of the Viking Age, that enables this process of abstraction and tropification.

Such a process entails the continual decontextualization and recontextualization of vikings to suit all manner of needs and purposes. Vikings are continually “conjured in an assemblage of alternative Earthbound pasts, fictive post-apocalyptic futures, as well as inhabiting various supernatural realms, alternative universes and outer space” (Williams 2024, 230). It is far beyond the scope of this article to survey the reception of the vikings, so it must suffice to say that key periods in the modern era have shaped this material into the form we have today. In particular, the Victorian British contributed greatly to the creation of the modern, popular viking. In his seminal study of this phenomenon, Andrew Wawn asserts that the Victorians, indeed, essentially invented the viking, attaching to this figure enduring iconography that persists to this day, chiefly the horned helmet and the longship (2000, 372; see also Langer 2021 on the German origin of horned helmet imagery).

Outside of games that take vikings or Norse mythology as their main subjects, traces of this material can be found virtually everywhere due to its decontextualization and abstraction. Examples of such rehashes can be found in sci-fi video games, such as *Destiny* (2014) and *Destiny 2* (2017) transforming the god Heimdallr’s horn, Gjallarhorn, which he blows to warn the other gods of the impending Ragnarök, into a rocket launcher. In a similar game, *Warframe* (2013–), players control android warriors, one of the first available of which is named Loki, who specializes in stealth, deception, and trickery. While the latter example clearly draws inspiration from Loki’s nature as the trickster figure of Norse mythology, *Destiny*’s use of Gjallarhorn is more idiosyncratic. In these examples, elements of Old Norse literature are transformed into sci-fi set pieces at varying degrees of abstraction, thereby producing different opportunities for authentic recontextualization.

By drawing on a repertoire of authentic historical imagery (Wolterink 2017) to create immersive, virtual environments that feel realistic, even high fantasy games like *Skyrim* tap into (and affirm) ideas of the historical Middle and Viking Ages (Call & Lecaque 2021, 18). *Skyrim* is also an example of the recent shift toward “visceral” or “gritty” medievalism, which caters to audiences’ desires “for a higher degree of perceived authenticity and stronger historical flavor in their medievalist content, even (or perhaps especially) when it is presented to them in a neomedieval form” (McKenzie 2021, 31; see also Cooper 2021). Unfortunately, this hunger for authenticity, combined with the immediacy of simulated gameworlds, has led to developers’ uncritical (and unintentional) recirculation of racist and nationalist narratives attached to the vikings “as being embedded in medieval notions and worldviews and therefore legitimized in a pseudo-historical framework” (Call & Lecaque 2021, 18; see also Bjørkelo 2020). Even outside of explicitly extremist mythologies of history, *Skyrim*’s construction of the medieval and viking past is deeply intertwined with modern discourses of identity, whiteness, and authenticity (Cooper 2016).

The market for authentic historical experiences (Zimmermann 2021; Houghton & Alvestad 2021) is also demonstrated by the shared setting and visual language (mainly dress, hairstyles, and tattoos) of the History Channel series *Vikings* (2013–2020) and *Assassin’s Creed: Valhalla* (2020). The *Assassin’s Creed* series is particularly popular in historical game studies for its aspirations (and marketing claims) to highly accurate historical settings while containing a host of anachronisms—in the case of *Valhalla*, “...in conjunction with the particular tropes and popular conceptions surrounding the game’s subject-matter” (Grufstedt & Houghton 2024, 68). The series’ historical framing and marketing are illustrative of the way in which paratextual elements condition audience expectations,

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claiming to offer immersive adventures in simulated historical worlds. For instance, *Assassin's Creed* games stoke publicity and credibility through their use of historical consultants, often academics and professors specialized in the games' historical settings. This helps to sell the simulated viking world, in *Valhalla's* case, as more "inspired by history" than it is "a work of fiction" (phrases which precede the title screens of all *Assassin's Creed* games). As with *Skrym*, the legitimacy granted by these authenticating strategies has consequences, as has been starkly illustrated by public historian Bret Devereaux, who described *Valhalla's* depiction of the viking invasion of England as "stunningly irresponsible storytelling" (2020), recirculating colonial and racial narratives of the viking conquest.

Finally, as mentioned briefly in the introduction, the presentation of vikings and Norse myth is affected by a game's place of production, which is particularly important to this article's subject. For example, games produced in Nordic countries attest to an altogether different relationship with this material than that found in the rest of the world (Lasausse 2018). The context of game production is a focus in a set of approaches known as archaeogaming, "the archaeology both in and of digital games" (Reinhard 2018, 2) including the treatment of games as "time capsules" (Lasausse 2024), which, like any other text, capture and preserve cultural snapshots. Such a time capsule approach has also been applied to identifying progressive social discourses in viking games, which counterbalance their prevailing characterizations (Panaro 2021).

Having outlined viking authenticity in general terms and considered how video games such as *Ys X* can function as cultural snapshots that engage with these elements, the discussion now turns to the articulation of viking authenticity within the Japanese media ecology.

3 Vikings in Japan

When considering the question of viking authenticity in Japanese role-playing games, it is essential to recognize that such games have long drawn upon a wide range of cultural influences (Consalvo 2006), weaving local aesthetic sensibilities together with international mythologies and histories to construct rich, hybrid narrative worlds. Among these transnational influences, viking elements occupy a notable position, frequently appearing in character names, enemy designs, and overarching narrative frameworks, much as they do in video games produced

elsewhere. However, as will be seen, Japanese developers often reinterpret such motifs through a particular creative lens shaped by the conventions of anime, manga, and video games—all of which operate within a shared media ecology that prioritizes transformative creative liberties over strict historical fidelity.

Adaptations of this kind do not merely modify the original meanings of these references; rather, they frequently generate new, internally coherent mythologies specific to individual game franchises and the broader Japanese media landscape. As such, they often decontextualize viking motifs without providing the cohesive frameworks necessary for authentic recontextualization, becoming its own entity rather than building directly on a previously established understanding of vikingness. In this way, viking authenticity within Japanese video games is not simply adopted but actively transformed, resulting in representations that are ornamental and evocative yet often idiosyncratic, remaining largely untethered from the historical specificity of their sources (deWinter 2012, 76).

Crucially, the relatively unconstrained use of viking elements within Japanese popular media should not be construed as a failure on the part of Japanese creators to produce historically authentic representations. Rather, it reflects the reality that historical authenticity is seldom their primary objective, despite the Western emphasis on accuracy exemplified by the marketing of prominent titles such as the *Assassin's Creed* series. At the same time, notable exceptions demonstrate that Japanese developers are fully capable of engaging with historically grounded representations when it aligns with their narrative aims.

For instance, the *Kessen* series (Koei, 2000) offers a relatively rigorous portrayal of Japan's Warring States period, with the caveat that it entertains various what-if scenarios (on the critical value of alternate historical play, see Chapman 2016). Meanwhile in the context of viking material, the manga *Vinland Saga* (2005–2025) demonstrates that Japanese popular entertainment can pursue historical fidelity when desired, with author Makoto Yukimura conducting extensive research into the Viking Age to integrate historical figures, events, and literature into a compelling fictional narrative (Danesin 2017; Þórdís Edda Jóhannesdóttir 2021, 47). It is important to recognize, however, that all forms of historical fiction—regardless of the degree of rigor applied, and whether produced in Japan or elsewhere—necessarily entail a measure of creative license.

Although historically rigorous works do originate as parts of Japanese popular culture, they remain the exception rather than the norm, reflecting broader tendencies within mainstream Japanese popular media—manga, anime, and video games alike—to prioritize engagement and entertainment over historical precision. For example, *The Scarlet Sword* (1986-1993), a manga inspired by Old Norse sagas, freely adapts viking narratives while also incorporating Japanese religious concerns, aesthetic conventions, and emotional themes to resonate more strongly with domestic audiences, thereby prioritizing narrative appeal over fidelity to the historical and cultural context of its source material (Halldór Stefánsson 1994). In this way, the boundaries between fiction and reality in manga often collapse in the service of a particular type of storytelling, resulting in a mode of historical representation that favors simplification and dramatic effect over strict accuracy (Otmazgin 2016)—a pattern that extends to many instances of Japanese popular media as it subsumes external sources and makes them more palatable to a Japanese audience.

While such creative liberties may characterize the Japanese media landscape at a deeper level of analysis, one of its most immediately recognizable features is its adherence to a distinct visual aesthetic associated with anime and manga (Suan 2021, 11). Moreover, this influence extends beyond visual design as many story-driven Japanese video games—notably Japanese role-playing games—also adopt narrative tropes and thematic concerns characteristic of anime, including epic sagas and the valorization of friendship and perseverance. In this sense, the anime art style functions not merely as a visual marker, but as an indicator of narrative form and thematic content, signaling to audiences a broader set of genre expectations.

Looking back at the original *Dragon Quest*—often credited as the foundational work of the Japanese role-playing game genre—one can already observe the intersection of Japanese visual culture and Western fantasy motifs. The game's character designs were created by renowned manga artist Akira Toriyama, employing the same stylistic conventions as his widely popular *Dragon Ball* series, resulting in a visual synthesis that blends manga aesthetics with the iconography of medieval European fantasy. Notably, the protagonist, as depicted on the game's original cover art, wears a horned helmet—an image commonly associated with viking warriors.

While *Dragon Quest*'s character design does not explicitly position itself within viking iconography beyond this detail, it functions as part of a broader visual amalgamation of Western medieval fantasy, within which vikings are often loosely incorporated (Wilkins 2019). This syncretism reflects a wider trend in Japanese fantasy media—as well as fantasy media in general—wherein various Western mythological and historical elements are blended into a cohesive, albeit not historically precise, aesthetic. The dragon can also be traced to Old Norse literature through the figure of Fáfnir, whose story in the *Völsunga saga* was later popularized in modern culture by J.R.R. Tolkien's adaptations, which helped establish dragons as a central trope of contemporary medieval fantasy (Fimi 2014, 341).

Whether in the form of dragons or other mythological beings, the fantasy genre has long exhibited a proclivity for referencing, reinterpreting, and repurposing elements from global mythic traditions across cultural contexts—be it in Japan or elsewhere. Beyond dragons, J.R.R. Tolkien extensively drew upon Old Norse literature in the construction of his broader mythopoeic world (Shippey 2005). Tabletop role-playing games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974) similarly appropriated figures from a wide range of mythological canons, incorporating creatures such as trolls, gorgons, basilisks, and goblins into their bestiaries (Peterson 2012).

Japanese game developers, in turn, have not only drawn from these same mythic reservoirs but have also occasionally appropriated elements directly from existing games. For instance, *Final Fantasy* (Square 1987) featured a monster design based on the beholder from *Dungeons & Dragons*, despite the creature being an original creation within the latter's intellectual property. Together, these practices contribute to a layered ecosystem of intertextual borrowing and creative reinvention that characterizes the fantasy genre across its various media forms.

Tracing the genealogy of such cultural borrowings is often challenging, if not impossible. Nonetheless, in some cases it is possible to identify how particular elements evolve within Japanese media (Escande 2022). The representation of the Norse god Odin in the *Final Fantasy* series is one such example, illustrating a process of recontextualization and internal myth-making. Odin is a recurring figure in the franchise, frequently portrayed astride his mythical steed Sleipnir. However, in *Final Fantasy XIII* (Square Enix, 2009), the two entities are fused into a single transformable being, evoking imagery more

akin to mecha or *Transformer*-like aesthetics than traditional mythology—effectively reimagining Norse material through the lens of a Japanese media genre. Aside from this deviation, Sleipnir is consistently depicted with six legs within the series, diverging from the canonical eight-legged depiction found in historical sources. Notably, this six-legged representation has remained consistent across numerous installments, despite frequent and radical redesigns of other mythological figures. This implies that rather than going back to the primary sources for Odin and Sleipnir, the developers of *Final Fantasy* have instead opted to refer to their own franchise-specific identity, imbuing them with a life of their own that exists independently of the original source material.

In *Norse Myths That Inspired Final Fantasy VII* (2020), fan scholar M. J. Gallagher provides a detailed examination of the various ways in which *Final Fantasy VII* (Square, 1997) might draw on Norse mythology. Gallagher's work, complemented by a similar volume on Greek myths, demonstrates that such mythological observations are by no means confined to Norse material alone. His analyses range from well-informed yet speculative connections to readily apparent allusions that are unmistakably rooted in Norse myth. Among the clearer examples are the adoption of place names such as Midgar and Nibelheim, both of which derive directly from Norse mythology (Gallagher 2020, 53, 64).

However, many of these interpretations rely predominantly on decontextualized references that are difficult to recontextualize into a coherent, interpretive framework capable of supporting readings of *Final Fantasy VII* as an authentically Norse-inspired narrative. For instance, Gallagher identifies Nibelheim as a particularly significant nexus of Norse references within the game, highlighting that it is the location where the player acquires the Odin summon and the Rune Blade, in addition to its Norse-derived name. Yet the significance of these references is diluted by the presence of numerous non-Norse elements within the same area, making it challenging to establish a consistent thematic link. As a result, the inclusion of Norse motifs in *Final Fantasy VII* remains largely ornamental, evoking a viking aesthetic without imbuing it with substantial thematic weight.

When considered alongside the factors previously discussed—namely, the expectation of transformative creative liberties, the influence of manga and anime as aesthetic and narrative frameworks, and the internal logics of cultural borrowing within the Japanese media landscape—this pattern of decontextualization becomes evident. Consequently, the lack of sufficient cohesiveness to enable authentic recontextualization characterizes much of the representation of viking elements in Japanese popular media. Despite notable exceptions such as *Vinland Saga*, this dynamic generally leads to a lack of opportunities for authentic recontextualization, instead favoring decontextualized renderings of the motifs being referenced.

4 Viking Authenticity in *Ys X: Nordics*

Having outlined broad tendencies within the Japanese media ecology to appropriate and reconfigure viking motifs, this section now turns to *Ys X* as a focused case study. By exploring the game's adoption of anime and manga tropes, viking imagery, mythological figures, linguistic elements, and environmental design, this section analyses how *Ys X* constructs a selectively authentic, viking-inflected world that resonates with genre and audience expectations for Japanese role-playing games. The picture that emerges is informed by various dynamics: the aesthetic and narrative norms of Japanese media, the authentic recontextualization of viking motifs, and the incorporation of more decontextualized or abstract references. While it is beyond the scope of this article to catalogue every allusion to vikings in the game, the following discussion offers a selective overview of some of the most salient viking tropes and markers that contribute to the production of a sense of viking authenticity in *Ys X* as a Japanese role-playing game—preceded by a brief summary of the game's relevant narrative elements.

Ys X follows Adol Christin, the series' recurring red-haired protagonist, as he sails into the Obelia Gulf, a region dominated by the Normans—viking analogues that include the warrior princess Karja, with whom Adol becomes magically bound.³ This bond grants him the rare power of mana, normally exclusive to the Normans, and forces the

³ It is important to note that *Ys X*'s Normans are inspired by the historical people of the same name, the "Northmen" who conquered a region of Frankia (modern day France) and their leader, Hrólfr (or Rollo

in Latin, as he is more commonly known through his appearance in History Channel's *Vikings* television series) who became a vassal of

pair into an uneasy alliance against the Griegr, supernatural beings that cannot be killed by normal means. The narrative unfolds through exploration, combat, and discovery, as Adol and his growing crew sail between islands, liberate allies, and uncover the mysteries of the Griegr. As shield siblings, it is up to Adol and Karja, to confront them and ultimately restore peace to the region.

4.1 Anime and Manga Influences

It is readily apparent that *Ys X* adheres to the aesthetic conventions of Japanese anime and manga, as its visual design explicitly emulates this art style in digital form. Characters are depicted with large, expressive eyes, simplified noses and mouths, and distinctive, often stylized hairstyles—hallmarks of the anime and manga aesthetic. Consequently, the game’s portrayal of vikings is mediated through a visual framework that modifies established iconographies, such as Victorian depictions, even in the process of depicting the same historical material.

However, the influence of anime and manga on *Ys X* extends well beyond visual design, shaping the game on multiple levels. As the narrative follows the journey of an adventurous young man, the game can be situated within the conventions of *shōnen* manga—a genre mainly targeted toward young male audiences but widely consumed across demographics (Japan Magazine Publishers Association 2023). This categorization is further enforced by the game subscribing to the traditional friendship, effort, victory story arc generally associated with the genre (Shamoon 2024, 166), as Adol and his companions band together to vanquish a great evil.

In this respect, Adol’s journey conforms both to the internal logics of the *shōnen* genre and to the long-standing narrative traditions of the *Ys* series, producing a representation of vikings that diverges markedly from the “gritty” aesthetic prevalent in contemporary Western portrayals such as *Vikings*, *Assassin’s Creed: Valhalla*, or even *Vinland Saga*. Instead, the game embraces a vibrant and optimistic tone, even in its more serious moments, eschewing the severity and somberness often associated with claims to authentic medievalism.

Furthermore, the expectations associated with anime and manga also account for the incorporation of

recognizable character tropes drawn from these media traditions. One prominent example is the inclusion of a loli character—typically defined as a female figure designed with the appearance of a prepubescent or pubescent girl. In *Ys X*, this role is embodied by Lila Mistral, who, despite her childlike appearance, is revealed to be an ancient nymph in the service of the sea god Ægir. While loli characters are neither unique to Japanese media nor universally embraced by Japanese audiences, the trope is sufficiently established within anime and manga to be widely recognized as a conventional character type (Winge 2008, 49). A further example is provided by Karja, whose personality closely aligns with the *tsundere* archetype, marked by an abrasive or combative exterior that gradually gives way to moments of vulnerability or affection.

In these respects, *Ys X* can be understood as engaging with anime and manga conventions across multiple levels: reconfiguring established iconographies to fit a particular aesthetic framework; aligning with the narrative conventions of *shōnen* manga as well as the internal mythos of the *Ys* series; and incorporating recognizable character archetypes into its storytelling. These dynamics underscore the extent to which the game participates in a broader media ecology that privileges stylistic resonance and narrative accessibility over historical precision. The following subsections will examine these issues in greater depth, with particular attention to authentic recontextualization and processes of decontextualization—phenomena that, while evident in anime and manga more broadly, merit special consideration as a part of viking authenticity in *Ys X*.

4.2 Authentic Recontextualization

As a foundation for authentic recontextualization, it is necessary to identify those aspects of the game that, although shaped by creative liberties, nevertheless retain significant connections to medieval sources or to the established repertoire of viking motifs. Such elements, integrated into the game’s narrative or mechanics, contribute to a sense of viking authenticity by resonating with prevailing assumptions about history or with recognizable cultural depictions of the past. In this way, they foster continuity between the game text and broader

Charles III and the first duke of Normandy. However, the Normans in *Ys X* are otherwise straightforward viking analogues, and do not have any further commonalities with their historical counterparts.

cultural imaginaries of the vikings, thereby creating conditions for authentic recontextualization.

Additionally, it is important to understand the way that the game's fiction and setting imply certain gameplay expectations (Fernández-Vara 2019, 144), and that these were established early in the planning stage. In an interview, Nihon Falcom president Toshihiro Kondo describes that sailing was the seminal game concept for *Ys X* as something they have never had Adol do in previous games (Mount 2025). While referring to his enjoyment of ship exploration in *Dragon Quest II*, Kondo also relates that he was in the middle of watching the *Vikings* television series, and so the two ideas naturally combined while workshoping their next game. Vikings, some of history's most famous mariners, lend themselves to an expectation of sailing, as they do in *Assassin's Creed: Valhalla*, where sailing and raiding comprise the core gameplay. In *Ys X*, we find a similar concordance of gameplay and fictional elements, yet with a different level of abstraction (Fernández-Vara 2019, 147–148)—where *Assassin's Creed* is attempting to “provide playable models of a historical event, system, or process” (McCall 2016, 523), *Ys X* does not share this goal, resulting in a greater number of instances of decontextualization described below.

As previously mentioned, Adol is granted the power of mana and handcuffed to Karja with a magical tether. This binding enables a greater synergy which only begins to manifest for the heroes after they begin to truly work together by becoming “shield siblings.” This concept has become somewhat pervasive in popular viking texts, although the term itself (“shield brother/sister”) has no origin in Old Norse as do other popularized facets of “viking culture” (e.g., *berserkr* for “berserker,” *Valhöll* for “Valhalla”). Instead, we find the term *fóstbræðr* in several of the Icelandic sagas, which means “sworn brothers,” and indicates an extra-familial bond entered into by two (or more) men who exchange oaths to avenge each other. One tale even takes its name from this relationship, the aptly titled *Fóstbræðra saga*. The term “shield sibling” appears to be of modern, yet uncertain origin, but it does appear frequently in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, which may partially explain its sudden pervasion. Linguistic misalignment aside, the concept does occur in Old Norse literature and has become a part of viking convention, and thus *Ys X*'s shield sibling element creates a node of authenticity within the game's story while also resonating with the *shōnen* theme of friendship and teamwork winning the day.

One of the ways that the power of mana manifests is by empowering its wielders' attacks, often with elemental forces. The heroic duo of Adol and Karja are elementally aligned with fire and ice, respectively. There are visual, narrative, and ludic aspects to this alignment which may foster authentic recontextualization. First, and most simply, is that Adol is likely aligned with fire due to his red hair and color scheme. Next, Karja's alignment with ice can confidently be attributed to her Norman heritage, and thus the broader association of vikings with ice, snow, extreme weather, and cold. This may also explain the choice of blue for the dominant color scheme of the Normans, and for the Balta seaforce uniforms, including Karja's.

The shield siblings and mana story elements are paralleled in gameplay mechanics through “duo mode,” which enables Adol and Karja to attack and defend as one, as well as to execute powerful, coordinated mana attacks that combine their elemental fire and ice. Some of these abilities are given names that reference Norse mythology, such as “Ragna disaster,” “Hárr's judgement,” and “Niflmuspell.” This latter name references the cosmogonic realms of primal fire and ice, Muspellsheimr and Niflheimr, whose combination led to the birth of the first living being and the creation of the world (*Gylfaginning*, 10). One of Karja's own abilities, “Fimbul slayer,” also reinforces her viking association by referring to Fimbulvetr (“mighty winter”), the winter lasting three seasons back-to-back that presages the onset of Ragnarök. For players around the world, references like Muspellsheimr, Niflheimr, Ragnarök, and Fimbulvetr are quite apparent due to the enduring popularity of these mythological elements, enabling a degree of authentic recontextualization on the levels of story, gameplay, and aesthetics. Despite this, the spectacle and animations of these duo attacks rest entirely within the conventions of anime and manga and bear little similarity with typical depictions of Norse mythology.

Finally, *Ys X* also caters to the growing awareness of non-martial viking activities, especially their reputation as traders. This occurs with the introduction of the character Einar, a Norman trader with a keen mind for business and diplomacy. Through dialogue, the game relates that not all Normans choose to be warriors, and that they sometimes put their superior maritime skills to use as traveling traders. Despite being a warrior culture, the Normans still need to grow food, produce crafts, raise livestock, and, indeed, engage in trade, and for this reason Einar is highly respected on Balta Island (despite his career choice leading to some friction from his disapproving, warrior father).

Einar thus demonstrates the influence of historical scholarship on public knowledge (vikings raided *and* traded), which then becomes an expectation that can be met to add authenticating detail for a more well-rounded, fictional viking culture.

4.3 Decontextualization

There are plenty of examples of the type of decontextualized, ornamental uses of Norse material previously discussed to be found in *Ys X*. These bits and pieces are sprinkled into the world and narrative without any of the concomitant detail that would link them to the historical context of their origins, serving only to lend an air of “vikingness” to the game. While the aim is to create such an air, stopping at decontextualization leads to a lack of coherence, limiting opportunities for authentic recontextualization.

This is, for example, demonstrated by the naming conventions of the game. *Ys X*, like many role-playing games, has a large cast of supporting characters, both secondary and tertiary, many of which are given Nordic names to increase the atmosphere of viking authenticity. However, the naming convention lacks consistency, seeming to jump between Old Norse and modern Nordic languages, spelling conventions, and name forms, including anglicizations. This also extends to the misapplication of masculine names to female characters and vice versa. While not problematic in any way, it is much more likely to be a symptom of this lack of coherence rather than an attempt at the subversion of gendered naming traditions on the part of the developers (or the translation and localization team).

For example, there are the traveling merchant Thrúd and the blacksmith Ivaldi. While the latter is certainly a fitting name and does provide an additional layer of authenticating detail (the sons of Ivaldi are dwarf blacksmiths mentioned in the *Prose Edda*), Thrúd is the name of Þórr’s daughter. In the game, however, Ivaldi is a woman and Thrúd is a man. Further, Thrúd is the anglicized form of the Old Norse name Þrúðr, which at least preserves the accented vowel which is absent from Ívaldi. Anglicizing Norse names is nothing new in medievalism, yet usually there is some consistency. While choosing to anglicize Þrúðr to Thrúd, *Ys X* also has characters like Jörð, Lqgr, and Óðr, the three main antagonists, whose names use the Old Norse characters “ð” and “ö.” Yet, even here there is inconsistency, as the “ö” in Jörð’s name and the “q”

in Lqgr’s name represent the same phonetic sound; “ö” is simply the modern orthography. There is also the case of Grimson Balta, Karja’s father and Jarl of the Balta Seaforce and Balta Island. The name Grimson is a patronymic (son of Grim) which is found in both medieval and modern Iceland (Grímsson), but in *Ys X* it is used as a first name. This gives yet another impression of decontextualization leading to incoherence as the naming conventions indiscriminately draw on both medieval and modern Scandinavian languages in an attempt to evoke viking authenticity.

As with the example of *Destiny*’s Gjallarhorn-turned-rocket launcher, *Ys X* has its own share of idiosyncratic reimaginings of Norse mythology. One example is the goddess Gullveig, who shares a name with a minor figure whose only mention is a single stanza in the eddic poem *Völuspá*. Despite this obscurity, two other recent video games have portrayed Gullveig: *God of War* (2018) and *Fire Emblem Heroes* (2017–), one from the USA and the other from Japan. In *Völuspá*, Gullveig is a member of the Vanir who is stabbed, burned, and resurrected thrice. Depending on interpretation, she is then resurrected as the witch Heiðr, who practices *seiðr*, a form of magic associated with curses and soothsaying (for an overview, see Kuusela 2019).

Both *God of War* and *Fire Emblem* run with this interpretation, casting Gullveig as a villain (a resurrected witch in the former, and a goddess of time in the latter). In *Ys X*, however, Gullveig is given an altogether new position as the benevolent, golden goddess of the Normans’ pantheon of deities. Neither the original source’s description of Gullveig nor her appearance in these other games corroborate any details of her appearance here. It also defies expectations to grant this role to more recognizable goddesses, such as Freyja, Frigg, or even Sif, who is also associated with gold through her golden hair.

Another example is the ships of *Ys X*, which also highlight the necessity for games in a series to be consistent across titles. While *Ys* is set in a markedly fantastical, alternate universe, it maintains clear ties with historical reality in the form of cultures and politics analogous to real ones, such as the “Romun Empire” and the “Ispanish” nation. The addition of a viking analogue in the form of the Normans also informs a temporality akin to the early Middle Ages. Despite all of this, the ships depicted throughout the *Ys* series are noticeably Early Modern European in design. While the Normans do have their own unique fleet of ships, they are a mashup of iconic elements

of the viking longships and the more modern ships of the rest of *Ys*'s gameworld. This may be an attempt to maintain the franchise's internal logic at the cost of historically accurate, Viking Age ships. They have the carved animal-heads on the stern and bow and square sails with colored stripes, yet they also have a modern, raised bridge with a steering wheel, three sails instead of one, a flagpole, no oars, and, most strikingly, they have onboard canons, as naval combat makes up a large part of the gameplay and action. The result is something "viking enough" for audiences of Japanese popular culture while maintaining some semblance of internal coherence of naval technology in the series.

5 Conclusion

It is noteworthy that the subtitle of *Ys X*, "Nordics," is never explicitly referenced within the game, nor is the term "viking" invoked at any point. Nonetheless, the game unmistakably engages with viking elements, though in a manner that reveals a complex relationship with its sources. On the one hand, it employs decontextualized and ornamental appropriations of viking imagery and Old Norse culture, functioning primarily as an aesthetic embellishment. On the other hand—albeit to a lesser degree—it also incorporates moments of more authentic recontextualization, demonstrating an awareness of, and engagement with, the broader transnational repertoire of viking conventions and historically informed imaginaries.

As a Japanese role-playing game, *Ys X* can be said to fall in line with the broader media ecology of Japan in which it was produced. In this context, the game is designed to appeal to audiences attuned to the conventions of Japanese popular media, audiences for whom historical accuracy is typically neither anticipated nor required as a condition for engagement. As a result, the game is able to present ornamental renditions of viking motifs without transgressing genre expectations, thereby circumventing concerns about authenticity by being embedded in a broader context which does not demand it. In this sense, players are invited to engage with viking signifiers without such engagement being tied to the wider demand for historically grounded experiences—a demand that has, in part, driven the recent resurgence of vikings in Western contexts. Moreover, *Ys X*, explicitly resists the darker, grittier aesthetic often associated with medieval and viking authenticity that has become prominent in contemporary Western popular culture. Instead, it rearticulates the more

optimistic and idyllic sensibilities of certain strands of the Japanese media ecology, thereby producing a distinctive mode of viking representation.

Due to limits of space, the analysis presented here only covers a fraction of *Ys X*'s viking elements. The subject of video game vikings is itself a brand-new subtopic of historical game studies, and thus, their appearance in Japanese game contexts has yet to receive due attention. As this article demonstrates, the production of viking video games is neither new nor does it show signs of abating in either Japan or abroad. As a first step in the subject of Japanese video games' use of Old Norse culture, this article hopefully encourages the recognition of the global nature of the construction and maintenance of the vikings in the present.

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