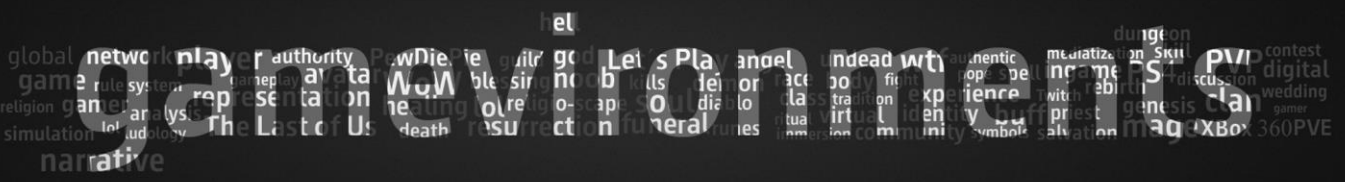
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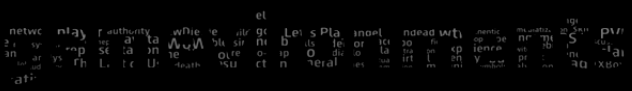

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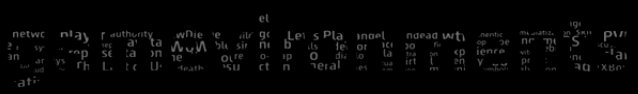

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"I Left Valheim For This?" The Gaming Cultures of *Valheim*. A Conference Report

Sophia Rosenberg

Abstract
The Network for the Cultural Study of Videogaming (NCSV) at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) focuses on promoting the research of video games and the cultures surrounding them, due to the observed importance of video games as cultural facilitators. On 29 April 2022, the network held their first international conference called "'I Left Valheim For This?' The Gaming Cultures of Valheim." It was held virtually over Zoom, and across two panels, presented papers from several interdisciplinary academics that all focused on *Valheim* (2021), a survival-sandbox game based in Norse mythology. The first panel – *Valheim In Practice* – focused on an analysis of both in-game mechanics and events, while the second panel – *Valheim In Theory* – presented research on broader cultural aspects regarding the games' narrative, inspiration, and online community. The result came in the form of expert scholarship that covered multiple unique aspects of the game that not only promoted conversation, but allowed presenters to showcase their recent research and analysis to a panel of like-minded individuals who were equally passionate about the overarching topic. This report provides an overview of each presentation from both panels, and highlights notable aspects of the conference, including interconnecting discussions, thought-provoking interpretations, and comments from participants and attendees.

Keywords: Valheim, Video Games, Game Culture, Cultural Studies, Cultural Analysis, Conference, gamevironments

To cite this article: Rosenberg, S., 2022. "I Left Valheim For This?" The Gaming Cultures of *Valheim*. A Conference Report. *gamevironments* 16, 126-144. Available at http://www.gamevironments.uni-bremen.de.

The Network for the Cultural Study of Videogaming (NCSV) is an organization at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) formed in the Fall of 2021. Spurred by the university's recent launch of an e-sports initiative and growing interest in the gaming industry, the network aims to bring video games and scholarship closer together to facilitate a learning environment focused on video games and their cultures.

The social, political, international, and economic impact of video games has undoubtedly shaped how academics have prioritized their analysis over time. Despite the attempted *othering* of video games (Shaw 2010), it would not be outlandish to say that video games can be considered to be cultural artifacts (Steinkuehler 2006). They can be used to examine the status of culture – including popular, mainstream, and media culture – at the time it was published and observe online cultures created as a byproduct. The study of gaming culture has relied on pulling methods across various disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, philosophy, and religious studies. Video games are unique as their resulting cultural bodies not only include the gamers themselves, but also outside social, cultural, and economic factors that further influence the video games' culture.

Conference Format

"I Left Valheim For This?" The Gaming Cultures of Valheim was the first conference hosted by *The Network for the Cultural Study of Videogaming* on 29 April 2022. It presented the papers of multiple academics on a variety of topics all related to *Valheim* (2021), an indie survival-sandbox game developed by Iron Gate Studios and published by Coffee Stain Studios in 2021. *Valheim* is based on Norse mythology, in which the god Odin used the world of *Valheim* to house monsters he had previously

slain before isolating it from the world tree Yggdrasil. The player is a reincarnated warrior tasked with killing five main bosses to prove their worthiness to Odin. There is a heavy emphasis on exploration, building, combat, and survival in terms of game mechanics, and the malleable nature of *Valheim*'s gameplay allows for one to analyze not only the game itself, but the broader cultural aspects surrounding it. The game became the conference topic because of how it stood out among the dozens of new games released in the past year. Being one of the most successful and unique indie games of the year, *Valheim*'s appeal stems from several factors, such as nostalgia-inducing graphics, and mechanics atypical to the survival genre that now allow players to explore and experiment without major consequences. Above all, *Valheim*'s multiplayer capabilities went hand in hand with its release during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is affordable price and co-op elements, combined with the isolation caused by Covid-19, caused the game to skyrocket in terms of popularity, making it a unique case study. Moreover, the game also serves as an interesting example of the Viking trend that has dominated popular culture for decades. From books and films to video games and anime, fascination with Norse mythology and Viking culture has become a persistent presence seen throughout the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

The conference was open to students and faculty worldwide; as stated on *The Network for the Cultural Study of Videogaming* website, "Whether a first-time player or a wizened warrior, we invite you to join us!" (The College of Arts & Sciences 2022). Held virtually from 1:00-5:00 PM EST, it was split into two panels with four presentations each; *Valheim In Practice* from 1:00-2:30 PM and *Valheim In Theory* from 3:00-4:30 PM. Both panels were moderated by John Borchert, a lecturer in Religious Studies at UNCG and Associate Director of *The Network for the Cultural Study of Videogaming*. Borchert officially opened the conference by thanking the attendees for coming, before introducing *The Network for the Cultural Study of*

Videogaming, briefly explaining the conference's overarching theme before introducing the first panel and presenter.

Valheim In Practice

The first panel, *Valheim In Practice*, showcased four presentations that focused on game mechanics, or the *rules* of the game that guide player behavior and "facilitate and encourage a user to explore and learn the properties of their possibility space through the use of feedback mechanisms" (Cook 2006). Though each presentation had a unique topic and focused on different mechanics, they shared a common interest in the level of immersion players experience through gameplay. *Valheim*'s game mechanics are centered around exploration, building, conquering, crafting, survival, and – in multiplayer experiences – cooperation. However, with *Valheim* being a sandbox-survival game, the *rules* are rather loose-fitting; players are not confined to what they can and cannot do, and are instead encouraged to make the game their own. Building, for example, is limited only by what parts will or will not *snap* together, therefore allowing players to build whatever they desire as long as they have enough crafting materials. Throughout the panel, each presenter took a look at how players interpreted and responded to *Valheim*'s game mechanics. The first three presentations each focused on a specific aspect of the gameplay, while the last presentation discussed the general game mechanics as a whole.

Sophia Rosenberg, a sophomore Anthropology and Religious Studies student at University of North Carolina at Greensboro, discussed in their presentation *Out For A Sailing Adventure: The Importance of Boat Journeys for Communication Among Players in Valheim* the importance of online communication in video games, specifically focusing on *voice chat* and how it allows players to verbally express themselves

through third-party software when communication is limited at the hands of the video game. They thoroughly explained the role of boats within *Valheim*, both as a maritime vehicle and as a progress marker that showcases a player's experience. Rosenberg then emphasized the significance of boat journeys and described the boat's role as a liminal space where players could facilitate non-game-related discussions and therefore strengthen their interpersonal bonds and relationships within a virtual space.

Using evidence from fieldnotes they collected while conducting a xeno-virtual ethnography of two *Valheim* servers, they talked about how the players, though unable to interact physically due to Covid-19, were able to use *Valheim* as a virtual substitute. Within *Valheim*, as player focus was on in-game content and events for the majority of the play sessions, boat travel allowed for players to *let their guard down* and talk about personal projects, current events, and cultural differences without having to worry about being ambushed by monsters.

Lisa Kienzl, a postdoctoral researcher at the Institute for Religious Studies at the University of Bremen, was next to present her topic, *Building and (Re-)Creating in Valheim* which was split into three parts: an introduction to Vikings in popular culture; an explanation of Northern culture within *Valheim*; and the significance of building in *Valheim*. Kienzl opened the first part of her presentation with several examples of how Vikings are portrayed in ways that shape our idealized perception of Viking culture through the lens of popular culture, such as the video game *Assassin's Creed Valhalla* (2020) and the television show *Vikings* (2013 – 2020). Quoting medieval historian Alicia McKenzie (2021), Kienzl explains that this historical context, though not always accurate, makes video games seem more authentic and realistic, therefore more appealing to gamers. In *Valheim*, Northern culture is portrayed through this

romanticized lens that is still affected by popular culture's discourse around the imagery of Vikings. It is important to remember that when we use the term Viking, our idea of a unified group did not exist.

Building in *Valheim* is presented as one of the central components, and Kienzl claims that what is being built is important, as well as the process, and the performance and reinterpretation of modern and historical monuments within *Valheim*. She analyzed 20 popular YouTube videos related to building in *Valheim*, including showcases, where a player shows off what they have built to the community, and tutorials, where a player demonstrates how to build something using step-by-step visuals. Kienzl then explained her observations regarding the aforementioned parts of building in *Valheim*. Regarding the performance aspect, she saw an appreciation for the builder's skill, often shown through statements such as *Awesome build!*. Moreover, there were several instances where players would draw inspiration from the build to construct the same monument in their own game or use it to build something similar. For reinterpretation, there was an observed phenomenon of the *re-creation* of Norse Imagery and Viking material culture through the construction of pop culture monuments and icons. Players would strive for accuracy whether or not the source of their construction was based on fiction or reality. Kienzl concluded her presentation by explaining that building in *Valheim* serves the important role of game content, and serves the players as a central component of gameplay that provides meaning to the process of creation. This process, therefore, recreates and engages with our perception of Viking culture within the game.

Third to present was Kathrin Trattner, a postdoctoral researcher at the Institute of Religious Studies at the University of Bremen, with her topic *Production, Accumulation, Progress: Capitalism and/in Valheim*. Trattner started her presentation

with a discussion of a player-made structure in *Valheim* called "The Greydwarf Toaster 5000" (u/Leathermattress 2021); a large ditch filled with fire pits surrounding a Greydwarf spawner. Greydwarfs, a low-level monster that spawns in the Black Forest biome, would fall into the ditch and catch on fire, eventually burning to death and allowing the player to collect necessary crafting materials post-mortem. Video gaming and capitalism are often discussed in terms of video games and production marketing; narrative representations of capitalism; and/or video gaming practices and capitalism. The *Greydwarf Toaster 5000* is an example of how game mechanics can allow the player to mimic cost-benefit calculations to maximize the production and accumulation of materials in a resource-intensive game. Using examples from Reddit threads and a *Valheim* server she plays, she argues that the structures are not only apparent in management-simulation games, but also in survival games by focusing on accumulation, technological progress, and labor. Citing Abraham (2022), she explains that the crafting systems of survival-games such as *Valheim* "almost invariably end up replicating capitalist notions of return on investment and increasing rates of accumulation (if in rather simplified, cartoonish ways)" (Abraham 2022, 75).

Concluding her presentation, she explained that players seemed irritated with the lack of a market structure, which greatly contrasts with her personal experience on her *Valheim* server, which follows a communal, socialist-lite lifestyle. With her observations, she finished by clarifying that whether or not capitalist structures are programmed into the game, it is ultimately up to the players to determine what is happening and how they interpret the means of production in the survival-sandbox space.

The final presenter in the *Valheim In Practice* panel was Wade M. Maki, the Program Director of the Bachelor's Arts and Liberal Studies program at UNCG and a senior

lecturer in applied ethics, and moral and political philosophy. His presentation was titled *Finding Love, Peace, and Death in the Afterlife: How Valheim's Design Philosophy Exceeds the Sum of its Parts*. Maki explained that even though the game does not live up to the perceived battle fantasy that most would associate with Viking media, the game has undoubtedly made an impact in the short time since its release. His focus, however, was on *Valheim*'s unique design philosophy and how it violates the *rules* of game design. Most games, whether developed by small independent teams or dominating publishers, have a story, impactful choices, non-playable characters (NPC), character development, and progression markers. In particular, survival games have constant threat pressures, multiple needs (food, water, shelter, etc.), and player-versus-player (PVP) options.

With these common game components in mind, Maki explained that *Valheim*'s design is, all things considered, illogical. With a limited story, no need to engage with other players, recyclable items and materials, and non-fatal needs that a player can choose to fulfill, Maki asked why *Valheim* is successful when its design philosophy is so far from the norm? To answer this, Maki pointed out that *Valheim* is ultimately what the player makes of it. The player can choose to play low-risk or high-risk depending on their playstyle, and with *Valheim*'s forgiving design, the player can respawn again and again to fine-tune strategies from where they left off, therefore progressing without setbacks. Maki noted the importance that the Covid-19 pandemic had in enhancing the game's appeal. As people were trapped in their homes and unable to see one another without risking their health and safety, *Valheim* served as a virtual medium that allowed players to interact with one another in a world that did not have limits or consequences and did not impose more demands on already-distressed lives. He concluded his presentation by attributing *Valheim*'s

appealing design to its positive, controlled environment that encouraged players to work together, and facilitate love and friendship in the midst of a life-changing event.

After all had presented, Borchert opened the floor for questions and comments on the first set of presentations, of which there were some highlights: Sophia Rosenberg was asked if they could think of similar experiences like the boat journeys in *Valheim* in other video games that allowed for freeform communication and discussion among players. Rosenberg, even though they could not think of games where travel played a similar role as it does in Valheim, suggested that there were many examples of adjacent experiences, such as waiting rooms for competitive multiplayer games like *Call of Duty* (2003 - 2021) and *Dead by Daylight* (2016).

Further, the question arose if *Valheim*'s design philosophy could also be applied to *Minecraft* (2009). Maki admitted that he had never played *Minecraft*, but from his point of view, said that even if the design philosophies were similar, *Valheim* is unique in that it would not have become as popular in any other year since the pandemic had a monument influence on the game's appeal as a virtual medium for players to connect with one another during difficult times. He said that he could not see the same happening to *Minecraft* at this point in time, and asked open-endedly the effect that Covid-19 had on *Minecraft* players. Another interesting discussion emerged about the usage of screenshots: several of the presenters put screenshots of quotes from social media in their presentation, and the question was raised how they approached the issue of copyright and the use of user created content. Coming from the perspective of a US citizen, Gregory P. Grieve, another presenter, explained that North America copyright laws are different then in Europe. However, ethical questions of course are relevant for researchers around the world when using data. Kerstin Radde-Antweiler hopped in to comment from a European perspective and

noted the difficulty of even just reposting simple screenshots. It was a thought-provoking discussion which highlighted regional regulation differences and ethical research questions that have a large impact on a researcher's process, depending on where they are conducting or publishing their research.

Valheim In Theory

Valheim In Theory, the second and final panel for the day, centered around topics that analyzed *Valheim* (2021) through various critical lenses. All of the presentations were unique and did not have several connecting discussions or ideas. Two of the presentations examined *Valheim* through a spiritual lens; one evaluated whether or not *Valheim* contained elements of modern Heathenry, while the other seeked to analyze the sacred experiences he encountered while playing *Valheim*. The other two topics focused on the value of death, and eudaimonia through online gaming respectively. However, all of the presenters stressed the importance of player experience and touched upon how gamers themselves interpreted the more abstract concepts presented to them while playing *Valheim*. Whether the presenter discussed religious experiences, Norse mythology, or the role of death in-game, the forefront of each person's research came from examining not only how gamers play *Valheim*, but specifically how the in-game metaphysical determines why they play *Valheim* the way they do.

The first presenter was Jane Skjoldli, a senior lecturer at the University of Stavanger in Norway. Skjoldli is one of the lead researchers on the interdisciplinary project Back to Blood: Pursuing a Future from the Norse Past (University of Stavanger 2021), which analyzes the connection between popular cultures' fascination with Vikings and Nordic culture, and people's concerns regarding sustainability, identity, and

citizenship. Skjoldli began her presentation *Playing with the Gods: Does Valheim Teach People Contemporary Heathenry?* by describing several main components of contemporary Heathenry as detailed by American sociologist Helen A. Berger (2019). Some of these qualities include connection to the Norse past; an emphasis on nature; and rituals that celebrate the natural cycles.

Her presentation focused on applying these characteristics to various aspects of *Valheim* to see whether or not *Valheim*'s gameplay and narrative contained elements of Heathenry. For example, Skjoldli analyzed the introduction text that the player sees upon starting a new game. The text did allude to a connection to the Norse past, the acceptance of evil and death, and the incorporation of a mythology of a *return* to pre-Christian practices. She went on to discuss Heathenry in regards to symbolism, runestones that established micro-theologies, the environments, and monsters. In concluding her presentation, Skjoldli ultimately stated that the presence of Heathenry in *Valheim* was complicated; she argued that it presented Heathenry as a dark gray religion: the game draws from a similar source material and presents nature through an enchanted lens whilst creatively reimagining Nordic mythology and folklore. However, the game does not share Heathenry's admiration for nature, as several nature-inspired creatures are presented as monstrous, and the gameplay revolves around the constant extraction and utilization of natural materials that cannot be avoided if one wishes to progress.

Second to present was Kerstin Radde-Antweiler, a professor of Religious Studies at the University of Bremen with her topic *"Fight, Explore, It all ends in the grave." The Value of Death in Valheim.* Radde-Antweiler's presentation explored the value and role of death through four different lenses; Death as a narrative frame, narrative story line, pedagogical tool, and a communicatively constructed value. She explains that

death is a requirement to begin the game, as the player's role is that of a reincarnated warrior brought back to life by Odin. Moreover, with *Valheim* being a survival-sandbox game, Radde-Antweiler then argues that death is inherently ingrained in the narrative storyline. With an abundance of hostile mobs and peaceful animals, she explains that the player is forced to kill in order to survive. For example, lots of food recipes that give the player health points (HP) and stamina require meat, and there is a noticeable lack of foods that provide the player with an advantage in the same way meat-based dishes would.

As a pedagogical tool, death in *Valheim* draws upon elements common in other survival games by punishing the player when they die. Upon being killed, players wake up at their set spawn point in their underwear with an empty inventory, and a 10% decrease in all of their skill levels. The punishment, whether extreme or not, nonetheless motivates the player to improve and fine-tune their combat skills to suit the situation. Finally, Radde-Antweiler explains that her approach to death as a communicatively constructed value comes from the idea that values (in general) are constantly being reconstructed, redefined, and negotiated by different actors through different methods of media communication. This perspective comes from a combination of three theories that Radde-Antweiler highlights specifically: Social Constructivism, Communicative Constructivism and Mediatization. Pulling from a concept created by Grieve, Zeiler, and herself, Radde-Antweiler describes how value formations are "not stable concepts but ever changing as they are constantly reconstructed on both the individual, community, social level" (Grieve, Radde-Antweiler and Zeiler 2020, 81). Applying this to *Valheim*, she focused specifically on the ascribed values of the death of in-game monsters, in-game gamers, and *outgamers*. Radde-Antweiler concludes her presentation by clarifying her analysis is in no way finished or explored as much as it could be. She is interested in the missing

value of death in *Valheim*'s gamevironment, and wants to ask further analytical questions, such as whether or not the game genre plays a role and what values are connected with each other, and which values are not.

Christopher Helland, a professor of Sociology at Dalhousie University researching the transfer of the sacred into cyberspace, was third with his presentation *Playing with the Sacred in the Sandbox: Valheim as Unalloyed Religious Environment*. Based on ethnographic research taken from his own experience playing *Valheim*, Helland's presentation sought to analyze the religious and spiritual experience he encountered due to how he saw and responded to religion in the game environment, despite the lack of a present structured religion. He saw that there was just enough sacredness present in *Valheim* through three main aspects and aimed to expand on each one before linking them to the unalloyed religious experience he claims can occur. The first aspect Helland touched on was "The Sacred Created in the Game For Us." Natural in-game structures are explicit and obvious forms of the sacred. For example, the spawn point where the player is dropped cannot be changed, damaged or manipulated by any means. It serves the sole purpose of being a sacrificial site where a player can gain a boss' Forsaken power upon killing them. However, he says that one of the most sacred occurrences in the game was the rare sightings of Odin. Sacred occurrences programmed into the world for the player have an inherent religious connotation to them; they have boundaries that set them apart from the mundane, and the players are not directed on how to interact with them.

The second aspect was "The Sacred Created in Game by Us," or in other words, "Sandboxing the Sacred." During his time playing *Valheim*, Helland and his friend found themselves creating their own boundaries and interpreting sacred occurrences based on how they appeared in-game. For example, every time the two saw Odin,

they would place a firepit surrounded by a fence where he had appeared. As they gained more experience and materials, they upgraded from building firepits to large bonfires to, at one point, a large stone pyramid built where Odin had appeared in the two's homestead. This *Temple of Odin*, and the various other structures Helland and his friend built, generated a sense of awe and accomplishment and served not only practical purposes, but also further embedded the presence of the sacred in their game.

The third and final aspect that Helland discussed was "The Mysterium." Where some players would see glitches, Helland saw manifestations of the divine. This aspect was, as Helland explained, not created by the developers to add a religious component to the environment, nor was it created by Helland and his friend during their gaming sessions. He clarified that not all glitches were regarded as sacred, as some were annoying and frustratingly disrupted the gameplay. There were forms of disruption, however, that Helland saw as mysterious, supernatural events and therefore elicited more positive reactions. One of Helland's favorite glitches was a runestone that would occasionally be seen floating in the air. If a player positioned themselves underneath it before the stone reset back to its natural position, the player would be inside the stone. This was one of the only ways he could manipulate and interact with the runestones, making it a notable glitch that caused excitement whenever it occurred.

Helland concluded his presentation by saying that he decided to frame his observations as an unalloyed religious experience in two ways; Firstly, *Valheim* was pure in the sense that it allowed him to develop and play with religion as he saw fit, therefore "sandboxing the sacred." Secondly, the game provided him with unalloyed discovery, mystery, and spiritual joy that he did not experience in the real religious

world. However, once the two killed the final boss, they found themselves in a limbo that was spiritually unfulfilling and lacked recognition for their efforts, to which Helland hopes that an update will come in the near future that will re-enchant the game with new discoveries, mysteries, and opportunities to implement the sacred.

The final presenter for the *Valheim In Theory* panel and for the conference itself was Gregory P. Grieve, head of the Religious Studies department at University of North Carolina at Greensboro, director of *The Network for the Cultural Study of Videogaming*, and leader in the field of digital religion. Grieve's presentation was titled *Video Gaming as a Work-Around for the Good Life: Ludic Friendship, Eudaimonia, and the Cooperative Fighting of Trolls in the Videogame Valheim*. He began his presentation by discussing the ever-familiar feeling of loneliness that, in his words, has only been exemplified during the Covid-19 pandemic, leading to what German sociologist Hartmut Rosa calls *muteness* (Rosa 2019). Grieve argued that video gaming could lead to the creation of friendships, lessen loneliness, and lead to fulfilling eudemonic flourishing. Specifically, he wanted to show how *philiagenesis* – the cultivation of friendship – can be done through social activities in online multiplayer games. Moreover, as part of his argument, he rebutted against the idea that online gaming was an anti-social activity. He explained that multiple studies of actual gamers have made it clear that video gaming can result in prosocial effects, i.e., ludic friendships. In the case of *Valheim*, Grieve focused on troll fighting and used two examples from the field notes of a previous presenter, Sophia Rosenberg. *Valheim*'s online, cooperative play model creates a sense of community because of the monsters. When players band together to kill a troll, the experience of fighting the beast creates a sense of philiagenesis, and in turn, fosters eudaimonia through friendship despite the lack of face-to-face interaction.

Concluding his paper, Grieve explained that in order to bring about eudaimonia and flourish, one must learn to be mindful of their loneliness and work to lessen it. He acknowledged that online interaction might not be the best medium for creating and solidifying friendships, but stated that multiplayer gaming in particular offered itself as a usable work-around in the face of a global pandemic taking place during a highly-digitized age.

As with the first panel, Borchert opened the floor for questions after all had finished presenting. The discussion evolved around the topic of how glitches can affect player behavior. Maki proposed a hypothetical scenario where a naturally occurring glitch had an increased chance of appearing if the player performed a certain action, and expressed his interest in learning how the implementation of such a mechanic would change the way someone plays the game. Helland responded by first talking about a glitch he encountered in *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* (2011) where a ghost that would help the player in certain dungeons glitched and ended up staying with him for the rest of his game, only to force him to restart the game when it blocked the exit of a dungeon, therefore preventing him from progressing. He searched up the glitch, read all about it, but could never replicate it. He remarked that he thought it would be interesting if a mechanic such as the one Maki proposed was purposefully implemented into a game, as it would add an element of mystery and discovery to the player experience. Jane Skjoldli jumped in to add that her and her partner had been recently discussing a similar topic, wondering how effective rituals and in-game ritualization – such as giving offerings to gods – could potentially change game mechanics. Kerstin Radde-Antweiler remarked that her paper and Gregory Grieve's paper share a connection regarding the value of social bonding and relationships, and expressed interesting in learning how the pregame relationship of players is affected by in-game interactions and experiences, based upon factors such as how

well players know each other beforehand, and how big the group of players is. A guest who joined the conference invoked an interesting conversation regarding the way academics discuss Heathenry. Identifying themselves as a practicing Heathen, they brought up the issue of labeling certain religions as *folklore*. Skjoldli suggested for them to read a Swedish academic that provided more insight into the controversy surrounding the way academics discuss indigenous religions, and Grieve jumped in to say that though there are a lot of video games that appropriate indigenous cultures for content that often ends up being disrespectful, there is more and more media being created by indigenous people today that allow them to have a voice in how their culture is represented, such as the game *Never Alone* (2014). The guest, though not a presenter, caused a thought-provoking discussion to form that not only included the input of well-versed academics, but also that of an actual practitioner of Heathenry.

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