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There is No Word for Work in the Dragon Tongue

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The past decade or so has witnessed a relatively steady stream of scholarly interest in the mundane medieval—in labor, local economies, and their influence upon wider cultural production.¹ Despite this interest (and perhaps as a reaction to it), popular medievalism has continued to emphasize versions of the medieval that are decidedly more heroic—productions that are simultaneously (and paradoxically) more “realistic” and more “fantastic.” Labor plays, at best, a supporting role in these fantasies: while not absent, it rarely, if ever, has the same productive presence as it does in recent scholarly treatments of medieval economies. Inasmuch as popular medievalism allows for “work,” it does so only in the guise of courtly adventure and/or the feudal equivalent of middle management. In an essay written at the outset of the 2008 recession, we argued that these mechanics afforded audiences both an escape from and a displacement of labor—a means of imagining, albeit briefly, a time in which a day at the office consisted of vanquishing one’s foes and fostering dragons or nascent kingdoms.² In this essay, we would like to revisit the practices that we described earlier in light of Bethesda Softwork’s 2011 role-playing game, *Skyrim*, which was released just as the United States began to emerge from the throes of the Great Recession into the current jobless recovery.³ Much of what we observed earlier is still very much present in *Skyrim*, but the game also expresses a persistent concern with unemployment and a marked nostalgia for labor, a nostalgia that it struggles to reconcile with its more heroic inclinations. Recognizing that, as Fredric Jameson writes, it is often through architecture that “modifications in aesthetic production are most dramatically visible, and that their theoretical problems have been most centrally raised and articulated,” our essay uses the architecture of *Skyrim* as a starting point from which to understand the fraught question of how labor continues to be constructed in popular medievalism, and what these practices signify for the more serious work of scholarly medievalism.⁴

The fifth game in the Elder Scrolls franchise, *Skyrim* offers players a chance to immerse themselves in what is arguably one of the most expansive and open-ended medieval-themed worlds to date. The game is set in the province of Skyrim, which occupies the distinctly Scandinavian, northern

¹ See, for example, Paul Freedman, *Images of the Medieval Peasant* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), Nicola Masciandaro, *The Voice of the Hammer: The Meaning of Work in Middle English Literature* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), Kellie Robertson, *The Laborer’s Two Bodies: Literary and Legal Productions in Britain, 1350-1500* (New York: Palgrave, MacMillan, 2006), and Lisa Cooper, *Artisans and Narrative Craft in Late Medieval England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

² Kevin Moberly and Brent Moberly, “‘For your Labor I will give you treasure enough’: Labor and the Third-Estate in Medieval-Themed Role-Playing Games,” in *NeoMedievalism in the Media: Essays on Film, Television, and Electronic Games*, Carol L. Robinson and Pamela Clements, eds. (Lewiston: Edwin Mellon Press, 2012). The logistics of assembling this essay collection prevented it from being published until 2012.

³ *Skyrim: The Elder Scrolls V* (IBM PC Version), Bethesda Softworks (2011).

⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 2.

highlands of the fictional realm of Tamriel.⁵ This spectacular landscape is home to the Nords, a pale-skinned, blonde, brawny people whose name can simultaneously be read as a cognate for “north,” “Norse,” and “Nordic.” Representatives of the game’s imagined Viking culture, the Nords wear drab woolen tunics with intricately embroidered collars and cuffs. Although they sometimes don horned helmets, their weapons and armor recall those unearthed in Viking burials or described in various historical accounts, and their round, banded shields are adorned with the requisite Oseberg stylings. They frequently speak in thick Teutonic accents, and, on occasion, can be overheard disparaging anything that they do not consider sufficiently Nordish: magic-users, women, or any of the dark-skinned peoples who have migrated to Skyrim from other parts of Tamriel.

None of this is particularly original to popular medievalism, which has long romanticized the Vikings and their culture.⁶ What is novel about *Skyrim*, however, is the attention to detail with which this romanticism is executed. This is perhaps most obvious in the architecture of Whiterun and the game’s other towns and villages. Located roughly at the center of the province, Whiterun is the first walled city that players encounter, and, as such, serves as something of an introduction to the culture of the Nords. Accordingly, it features a variety of lavishly recreated, though somewhat eclectic examples of both medieval and medievally-inspired Scandinavian architecture. Whiterun’s shops, houses, and inns, for example, authentically reproduce the Dragon Style, a variation of the national romantic style that characterized both public and private Scandinavian architecture in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.⁷ Log-framed and braced with heavy timbers, they boast steeply-pitched roofs, ornately carved wooden insets and gable beams, and ridge crests that terminate in carved dragon’s heads. These elements also adorn the city’s temple and Jarl’s palace, but, here, they are grafted onto an older but also distinctive medieval Scandinavian architectural style, that of the stave church. This blurring of the medieval with the medievaesque is even more apparent in Jorrvaskr, a lavishly decorated, though authentically realized longhouse that, according to Whiterun’s residents, is the oldest building in the city.⁸

The houses, inns, and shops that players encounter in the Skyrim’s towns and villages are far less grandiose and thus appear to more authentically reproduce the historical realities of medieval

⁵ The game’s landscape reproduces many of the geological features that have become synonymous with Scandinavia in the popular imagination: jagged, snow covered peaks, swaths of tundra and boreal forest, deep azure fjords, and ice-choked harbors.

⁶ See, for example, Davis Clark and Carl Phepstead, eds., *Old Norse Made New: Essays on the Post-Medieval Reception of Old Norse Literature and Culture* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2007), and Matthew Townend, *The Vikings and Victorian Lakeland: the Norse medievalism of W.G. Collingwood and his contemporaries* (Carlisle: Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society, 2009),

⁷ See, for example, Barbara Miller Lane, *National Romanticism and Modern Architecture in Germany and the Scandinavian Countries* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Mari Hvattum, “Panoramas of Style: Railway Architecture in Nineteenth-century Norway,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 70:2 (2011), 190-209, and H. Arnold Barton, “The Silver Age of Swedish National Romanticism, 1905-1920,” *Scandinavian Studies*, 74:4 (2002), 505-20.

⁸ This concern with historical authenticity is also reflected in the interiors of Whiterun’s buildings. The soaring ceilings of the temple and the Jarl’s palace are supported by an intricate network of carved posts, wooden arches, and trusses that reproduce the distinctive scissor beams of the stave churches at Borgund and Hopperstad, Norway. Jorrvaskr’s interior accurately reproduces one of the chief characteristics of Viking longhouse architecture, namely, a central, sunken hearth surrounded by raised wooden platforms.

Scandinavian architecture. Symptomatic of the poverty that pervades the province, their thick, windowless walls are constructed of logs, rough-planks, and rubble stone. Although their low, drooping roofs are thatched rather than sod-covered, they nevertheless preserve the distinctive profiles of their medieval antecedents. The sparse interiors of these structures reflect an equal attention to detail. Framed by thick posts and crossbeams, many are constructed around central hearths and are decorated with a wealth of furniture, cooking utensils, and similar accoutrements. Though conspicuously plain, these elements are rendered with such detail that they seem as substantial as the more ornate items that grace the houses of Whiterun. This illusion is accentuated by the game's physics engine, which sends bowls, tankards, and pots clattering to the floor when players inadvertently brush against tables or shelves. Here, as elsewhere, the game's attention to material culture is impressive. There are moments, in fact, that *Skyrim* seems less like a fantasy than a digital recreation of the Viking living-history museums in Lofotr, Norway and L'Anse aux Meadows, Newfoundland—museums whose lavish and conspicuously reconstructed poverty is designed at every turn to impress visitors with the resilience of their presumed Nordic ancestors.

While the material culture of medieval Scandinavia provides *Skyrim* with a rich historical backdrop for the domestic world of the game, these elements are ultimately insufficient to the ludic exigencies of *The Elder Scrolls* franchise, of which the province of Skyrim is only a small territory. Accordingly, *Skyrim* supplements its Scandinavian elements with material drawn from many other historic and fantastic traditions, a propensity that is readily evident in the game's fortifications. Whiterun, for example, is protected by a mixture of masonry walls and wooden palisades. While these palisades invoke the type of defensive structures that, according to archeological evidence, might have existed at Trelleborg and similar ring fortresses, they are set atop stone walls that recall those of late-medieval castles.⁹ Much of the same can be said for the Jarl's palace, which, while distinctly Scandinavian, is grafted onto a Romanesque masonry foundation.¹⁰ This juxtaposition is similar in effect to that of the replica of the Hopperstad Stave Church that stands at the Heritage Hjemkomst Interpretive Center in Morehead, Minnesota, or, more fittingly, the Vang stave church. Dismantled and relocated from its original site in Norway to Karpacz, Poland in 1842, the remains of the twelfth-century church were subjected to an extensive restoration, one that involved fitting a rounded, copper baroque roof over the reconstructed apse and erecting a tall, stone tower, apparently to “shield the little church from sharp gusts of wind blowing off the Sniezka direction.”¹¹ As in *Skyrim*, the impulse to transport and reconstruct the Scandinavian ethos is informed by a larger socio-political desire not simply to surround, support, and protect the values associated with the

⁹ Sidney L. Cohen, *Viking Fortresses of the Trelleborg Type* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1965).

¹⁰ Players encounter an even more startling juxtaposition in the town of Markarth. There, the game's Nordic culture is not only superimposed over the masonry remains of an ancient city whose architecture is distinctly Byzantine in influence, but the city itself stands atop the ruins of the far older Dwemer civilization, one whose past glories are represented primarily by the gilded robots that still guard the secrets of its enormous mechanisms—machinery that is as distinctly Steampunk in its aesthetic as it is Mesopotamian.

¹¹ Edwin Pech, “History of the Wang Church,” *Wang Church*, accessed February 2, 2014, <http://www.wang.com.pl/en.php?D=51>.

heroic, northern Germanic heritage that the Norse represent, but to commandeer and, in so doing, participate in them.

As Andrew Wawn observes, however, such translocations overwrite and ultimately displace more pedestrian, though equally significant traditions.¹² Tracing the origins of the Victorian Viking revival, he writes that although there is much evidence that Iceland was well-known to the British “since the early thirteenth century days when the Icelandic sagas were first being recorded on vellum, it took many centuries for Viking and Saga-age visions to earn their place in the minds of Northbound travelers from Britain.”¹³ Iceland and Scandinavia were instead known for their trade in stockfish, which was regularly exchanged for “English cutlery, clothes, shoes, and meal.”¹⁴ It was only during the Victorian period, argues Wawn, when the British Empire increasingly began grappling with questions of national identity, that it began to look northwards in search of a Teutonic tradition that was suitably heroic enough to differentiate Britain and her values from those of Southern Europe.¹⁵

As a contemporary, Americanized version of such revisionist impulses, *Skyrim* also participates in the obfuscation, if not erasure of many less savory, though perhaps more pertinent discourses—not the geopolitical complexities of centuries of trading in salted fish and similar commodities, as Wawn writes about Victorian England, but rather the equally fraught realities of material and cultural production in late capitalism.¹⁶ As in games like *Morrowind* and *World of Warcraft*, *Skyrim* presents players with a world of material excess—one that is brimming with a seemingly inexhaustible supply of swords, axes, bows, and almost every other flavor of historical or fantastic medieval weaponry and armor, as well as clothing, jewelry, and more mundane items such as irons, tankards, and the occasional kettle or two.¹⁷ Yet this wealth is produced almost entirely off-screen. As with the products that crowd the shelves of supermarkets, big-box stores, and other sites of the so-called “New Economy,” the goods of *Skyrim* appear almost as if by magic in the game’s chests, its shops, and in the depths of the dungeons where the various peoples and creatures that the game classifies as undesirable make their homes.

This is not to say, however, that production is entirely absent from the game. *Skyrim* abounds with mines, mills, farms, and other sites of production, and even contains a handful of micro-breweries engaged in a cutthroat competition to produce the province’s best designer ale. Yet while almost all of these facilities are interactive, none actually work. Riverwood, for example, boasts a sawmill powered by a large waterwheel and a lever that, when thrown, treats players to the spectacle of logs being sawn by a large, reciprocating blade. Players, though, can send log after log through the mill

¹² Andrew Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians: Inventing the Old North in Nineteenth Century Britain* (Cambridge: Brewer, 2000).

¹³ Wawn, *Vikings*, 9.

¹⁴ Wawn, *Vikings*, 11.

¹⁵ Wawn, *Vikings*, 30.

¹⁶ Wawn, *Vikings*, 9-13.

¹⁷ Moberly and Moberly, “For your Labor,” 310-11.

without ever having to replenish its supply of felled trees. Moreover, there is no evidence of the forestry that would be required to supply timber to this or any other of the game's mills—industries that would leave noticeable scars on the game's otherwise pristine landscape, especially given the amount of wooden construction in the game.¹⁸ Production is thus represented in *Skyrim* in much of the same way that it is presented in various living history museums where the implements and mechanisms of various trade skills are reproduced with a large degree of fidelity, but where nothing is actually produced, except, of course, for the nostalgia for a way of life that once was.

By the same token, however, *Skyrim* is a world that very much needs to work. Released in 2011, at the moment the country began to emerge from the Great Recession, it presents players with an empire in crisis, one that has not only suffered decades of war, but which faces, with the return of the dragons, wholesale environmental destruction, and which is bitterly divided between two apparently irreconcilable political factions. Not surprisingly, the economy of many of the game's cities and towns is in shambles. Morthal's inn, for instance, is conspicuously empty, a circumstance that the innkeeper blames on the war. Winterhold is in an even more precarious situation. Home to the mage's college, it has been ravaged by a number of unprecedented storms and, as a result, has seen much of its former glory and influence collapse into the surrounding waters. Although Riften is more prosperous, its fortunes have declined to such an extent that its once renowned Thieves guild has fallen on hard times. This desperation is apparent even in Solitude, which, as the seat of the high king, is by far the largest and wealthiest city in *Skyrim*. Deeply divided between Imperial and Stormcloak loyalties, the city is overrun with refugees and its inhabitants are all too conscious of the dragons circling in the distance. Its resident alchemist tells players that her chief source of income is no longer boutique perfumes, but healing potions.

Players themselves enter *Skyrim* as refugees of sorts. Having escaped execution and a dragon attack, they arrive in Riverwood with little more than what they have managed to salvage from the carnage. Destitute and uncertain of their place in the game, they are forced to go door to door, seeking whatever assistance they can. When they speak to Ognar, the innkeeper, they encounter one of the most common dialog options in the game—they tell him that they are “looking for work” and ask him if he has any leads. Yet what players find is, generally, not work. Although they can earn a few coins chopping wood and selling harvested vegetables, they are invariably tasked with adventuring into the wilderness to recover a stolen artifact or to dispatch a renegade bandit or two. As we argue elsewhere, the result is a bloody spectacle of consumption, accumulation, and destruction, in which players “spend” health, mana, and stamina points not only to acquire gold, armor, weapons, and

¹⁸ This disconnect between the way that production and landscape are represented in *Skyrim* explicitly speaks to Valerie B. Johnson's call, in this volume, to formulate an “ecomediievalism” that seeks to understand how the material relationships between the human and the nonhuman is articulated through imagined medieval landscapes. It also speaks to what Amy Clary identifies as a trope of computer games such as *Uru*—games whose almost pornographic depictions of wilderness are produced, paradoxically, by the very digital technologies that are responsible for wholesale environmental destruction. See: Amy Clary, “Digital Nature: *Uru* and the Representation of Wilderness in Computer Games,” *Works and Days*, 43/44:22 (2004), 103-12.

similar commodities, but also to increase the relative commodity value of their characters, as quantified by the currency of in-game levels and experience points.¹⁹

Much of the same is true for crafting in *Skyrim*. Although blacksmithing and the game's other trade skills ostensibly appear more like production than the activities that its combat systems valorize as "work," they require players to engage in a similar sort of commerce—that is, to exchange predefined units of currency (iron bars, leather strips, etc.)—in order to acquire items, level skills, and, in so doing, increase the "value" of their characters. Combat and crafting thus represent two sides of the same coin. Homogenized, ritualized, and reduced to a series of token animations, they are the means through which the work of playing the game is congealed into and expressed through the fetishized images of the players' characters.²⁰

The game reinforces this point explicitly (and gruesomely) via its enchanting skill. Collapsing combat and crafting, enchanting allows players to charge magical weapons by first harvesting "soul gems" from the corpses of slain opponents and by then transferring this potential—the souls of the vanquished—into various commodities, where it is expressed in units of congealed value such as points-per-second of fire damage, increased aptitude with shields or bows, and the like. This confusion with the mundane for the heroic is very much like the conjecture about the origins of the Newport Tower in Rhode Island, the remains of a colonial mill that, according to Viking enthusiasts, is evidence of a much earlier heroic era of Nordic exploration and conquest.²¹ As with the Newport tower, the game's systems of combat and crafting originate in and, arguably, still bear some skeletal resemblance to day-labor and production, yet the underlying structure of these activities—the ruins of their architecture—has been appropriated and repurposed for ostensibly more heroic ends.

Ultimately, though, this heroic appropriation is less a matter of might and magic than linguistics. In a narrative arc that, consciously or unconsciously, reproduces many of the etymological concerns of the Viking revival in Victorian England, *Skyrim* constructs players as the "Last Dragonborn"—prophetic heroes whose natural, philological aptitude for the all-but lost dragon language (the "Thu'um") grants them unprecedented access to the various, runic words of power upon which the fate of Skyrim, and, of course, all of Tamriel depends. In order to access this power, however, players must engage in the heroic, ludic equivalent of many activities that, according to Wawn, also

¹⁹ Moberly and Moberly, "For your Labor," 332; For an analysis of how this dynamic also manifests itself in *World of Warcraft*, see Kevin Moberly, "Commodifying Scarcity: Society, Struggle, and Spectacle in World of Warcraft," *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture*, 4:2 (2010), accessed February 6, 2014, <http://www.eludamos.org/index.php/eludamos/article/viewArticle/vol4no2-7/179>.

²⁰ For an extended discussion of this mechanic, see Moberly and Moberly, "For your Labor," 325-30.

²¹ Kirsten A. Seaver writes that the Newport Tower has been variously identified as the seat of a fourteenth-century Norwegian expedition or a Norse church, but scholars believe that the tower is the base of what was once a colonial mill. See *Maps, Myths, and Men: The Story of the Vinland Map* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 55. On the dating of the Newport Tower, see Johannes Hertz, "The Newport Tower," in William W. Fitzhugh and Elisabeth I. Ward, eds., *Vikings: The North Atlantic Saga* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 376, which summarizes the conclusions of Hertz's longer article, "The History and Mystery of the Old Stone Mill," *Journal of the Newport Historical Society* 68 (235): 54-111.

characterized Victorian attempts to reconstruct Old Norse—that is, they must break into forgotten tombs, reassemble fragmented relics, and, in general, locate “Odinic spears and Thunoric hammers in improbable locations.”²² As Northrup Frye writes about romance, *Skyrim* thus engages players in something of a prelapsarian fantasy, asking them to work their way backward (and downwards) from Babel in search of the lost vocabulary of the purer, more powerful language of the forbearers.²³ It is only by doing so that players are able to realize a return to a garden of Eden of sorts, one that is imagined through play as existing prior not just to sin, but to work itself—a point that the game makes explicitly in the fact that there is no word for work, labor, or anything resembling production in the Dragon Tongue.

Yet as Marina Brownlee reminds us, romance also “involves a continuous and sophisticated reinvention of itself as a response to an ever-changing historico-political environment.”²⁴ So it is in *Skyrim*, which confronts an economic reality in which labor, especially in the domestic manufacturing sector, is itself increasingly a fantasy, and in which unemployment and underemployment is especially high among younger workers, many of whom constitute the game’s primary audience. *Skyrim* thus anticipates more recent works such as Disney’s *Frozen*, in which Kristoff laments the “supply and demand problems” that have beset the ice-harvesting industry after princess Elsa freezes the whole of Arendelle.²⁵ It also anticipates as the second installment of Peter Jackson’s *Hobbit* trilogy, which culminates with Thorin and his companions rekindling the long-idle forges of the Lonely Mountain in a last, desperate attempt to vanquish Smaug and, in the same fell swoop, revive the industries that had long supported the economy of the region.²⁶ Both of these are throw-away scenes, of course, and ultimately have no bearing on the outcomes of either narrative, but much the same can be said about *Skyrim*’s nostalgia for its displaced productivity.

As in *Frozen* and *The Desolation of Smaug*, *Skyrim* expresses a desire for labor, but this is a desire that is ultimately beyond its ability to articulate; the woes of Tamriel, economic or otherwise, can only be resolved through the recovery of a language that, quite literally, precludes the possibility of work. Inasmuch as this is an imaginative failure, it is one that, arguably, extends well beyond these texts. As a nation, we yearn for the return of the industries that sustained our economy for much of the twentieth century, but if we are honest with ourselves, few of us would aspire to work in these industries or be willing to bear the cost increases that their repatriation would entail.²⁷ Labor, it seems, is simply not worth that much to us. This is a complex structural issue, one that is well

²² Wawn, *Vikings*, 5.

²³ Northrup Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 173.

²⁴ Marina S. Brownlee, “Romance at the Crossroads: Medieval Spanish Paradigms and Cervantine Revisions,” in Roberta L. Krueger, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 253.

²⁵ *Frozen*, directed by Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee (Walt Disney Pictures, 2013).

²⁶ *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug*, dir. by Peter Jackson (New Line Cinema & Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures, 2013).

²⁷ For a striking example of this recent nostalgia for lost industry, see Rivka Galchen’s photo essay, “Fruits of the Loom,” *New York Times*, January 10, 2014, accessed February 14, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/12/magazine/fruits-of-the-loom.html?_r=0. Galchen’s article describes photographer Christopher Payne’s ongoing efforts to document the machinery and the workers of America’s remaining operating textile mills.

beyond ludic or narrative intervention. We worry, however, that this is also a scholarly issue, inasmuch as the discernible gap between academic and popular treatments of medieval labor has proven to be so enduring. Medieval labor clearly continues to inspire a significant amount of scholarly attention. How can we make it equally inspiring to wider popular audiences? Put another way, if the designers of *Skyrim* are familiar enough with scholarship about Viking material culture to know not to outfit Whiterun's guards with horned helmets, might it be possible, as a plausible next step, to convince popular medievalism of the importance of the work that was required to produce the treasures it so celebrates.