

“YOUR LEGACY IS YOURS TO BUILD”: DEFINING LEADERSHIP IN *BEOWULF* AND
ITS ADAPTATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes how narrative choice and media affect the depiction of leadership in *Beowulf* by studying three texts: the medieval *Beowulf*, the 2007 Hollywood film of the same name, and *Beowulf: The Game*. While the medieval text celebrates qualities of leadership that blend Germanic heroism and the Augustinian ideal of kingship, the film rejects ideal kingship and instead focuses on the vices of greed and pride as inherent in all leaders, thus rejecting good leadership completely. However, the video game strikes a balance and manages to again celebrate good leadership, though its celebration of the Hero King and condemnation of the Monster Slayer presents a dichotomy that the medieval text would consider necessary roles of any successful leader. By analyzing these three unique approaches to the same story, this paper reveals that these contemporary texts celebrate American violence and condemn the violence of the Other.

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DEDICATION

For Celena.

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INTRODUCTION: THE PROLOGUE

In 2007, two adaptations of *Beowulf* were released, and both were met with relative disappointment. The first, Robert Zemeckis' filmic *Beowulf*,¹ retold the story with motion-capture animation, and newly-integrated backstories. The second went quietly ignored, if not hated, by both the public and medievalists:² a video game based on the Zemeckis film, allowing gamers to explore the world of *Beowulf*. These adaptations both drastically changed the original storyline in order to reflect their own ideology. While movies set in the Middle Ages, such as *Excalibur* (1981), *King Edward* (1989), *First Knight* (1995), and *A Knight's Tale* (2001), may act as windows into a different world, video games have recently provided even more exposure to the widely misrepresented time period; rather than windows, they provide doorways to walk through, where the "reader" experiences the world first-hand.³

Video games like the series *Assassin's Creed* (2007),⁴ pitting Assassins against the legendary Templars, let the gamer explore a historical setting, fact-checked with historians and considered in the context of both history and game-play. Pierson Browne, in his article "Equal Opportunity Murder: *Assassin's Creed*, Games of Empire, Colonial Strategies and Tactical Responses," writes that though the game presents "a rich, culturally nuanced tapestry with an interesting historical backdrop brought to life by interesting and complex characters," the sensitivity of this cultural and historical approach do not extend to the protagonist, Altair (1-2). Other games, like *Clash of Clans* (2012), *The Legend of Zelda* (1986), and *Age of Empires*

¹ All further mentions of the filmic *Beowulf* will be noted as Zemeckis' *Beowulf*.

² See Candace Barrington and Timothy English's "'Best and Only Bulwark': How Epic Narrative Redeems *Beowulf: The Game*," particularly 37-40, for more discussion on why this is the case.

³ See Mark J.P. Wolf, *The Medium of the Video Game*, 75.

⁴ For more on the scholarship surrounding *Assassin's Creed*, consider El-Nasr et. al's "Assassin's Creed: A Multi-Cultural Read", Sisler's "Digital Arabs Representation in Video Games," and Kapell and Elliott's *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*.

(1997), employ a general idea of medieval setting, borrowing from concepts like the “barbaric” tribal fighting popularly associated with the Dark Ages or from the quest of the holy grail and relying on little to no story line (whether medieval or not).⁵ However, whether these games are accurate or not, they provide a framework of beliefs that shape and reinforce the gamer’s concept of the Middle Ages. Where *Clash of Clans* might reinforce the barbaric generalization of the Middle Ages, the more historicized *Assassin’s Creed* may also influence a gamer’s beliefs of the medieval Middle East, in some aspects reinforcing a westernized behavior to the protagonist (El-Nasr et. al). Ubisoft’s 2007 *Beowulf: The Game* similarly acts to provide a misguided framework for the gamer, and because it is adapted from Zemeckis’ *Beowulf* – itself an adaptation of the medieval text – studying these texts together provides an opportunity of insight that games like *Assassin’s Creed* or *Clash of Clans* do not. In analyzing *Beowulf: The Game* alongside the medieval *Beowulf*, the game can be seen as a synthesis of the American celebration of violence and the anti-hero.

An examination of three different texts based on the same story will reveal how contemporary film and video games can emphasize various ideological aspects of contemporary American views of the Middle Ages. While the semi-historical world of *Beowulf* is itself a representation of an earlier time period, the *Beowulf* poet uses that time period to examine his contemporary culture, and the same is true of any adaptation. Thus two contemporary adaptations of the medieval *Beowulf*, studied in conjunction with the medieval text, allow medievalists to understand three things: (1) how different media or genres appropriate and

⁵ In *Medievalisms: Making the Past in the Present*, Tison Pugh and Angela Jane Weisl note that though there is potential for educational video games, “most medieval games...[lean] heavily on a temporal fantasy that blurs boundaries of time, space, and history” (122). David T. Kline agrees, writing in *Digital Gaming Re-imagines the Middle Ages* that games like *Dungeons & Dragons* have “little regard for medieval realities” (4). Pugh and Weisl, noting the “scant medieval plotline” that most medieval games employ (124), reference *The Legend of Zelda*’s standard quest narrative, and write that “the story is secondary to the gameplay,” imbuing “the adventure with little more than appropriate thematic coloring” (124, 125).

recreate the medieval text, (2) how this appropriation influences modern audiences to understand and interpret medieval history, and (3) suggest a horizon of possibility for the creator of each media that suggests what they may have intended to reinforce, undermine, or ignore in their understanding of the past and in their reflecting/shaping of the present.

Game Play and Plot

The medieval *Beowulf* is split into three parts: in the first, a young Beowulf comes to the rescue of Hrothgar and the Danes, defeating the monster Grendel in the great hall of Heorot. In part two, Beowulf must defeat Grendel's mother in her underwater home, the mere. Finally, in part three, set fifty years later, Beowulf, who has become king of Geatland after his lord Hygelac (and his son) die in battle, defeats a dragon but is fatally wounded. The film follows a similar pattern in plot, but goes to great lengths in explaining backstories, employing a very Freudian (and Lacanian, according to scholars like Nickolas Haydock) lens. While Beowulf still travels to Denmark to defeat Grendel, he becomes king of the Danes (rather than the Geats) after Hrothgar commits suicide. Additionally, Grendel's mother is explicitly sexualized; it is (very obtusely) implied that Hrothgar had sex with Grendel's mother, birthing Grendel and thus being the reason for the danger his kingdom is in. Beowulf defeats Grendel ("bare" in all senses of the word), but rather than also battling Grendel's mother, he instead also succumbs to her beauty, creating the dragon who will eventually be his own downfall.

The video game follows the same plot as the film, but makes some minor narratological changes that affect analysis of gameplay and ideology. Perhaps to allude to its origins as an epic poem, the game is organized into acts and episodes. Act I: Grendel and the Golden Horn includes the plot situated in the first "part" of the medieval text and movie. This Act mostly includes the original plotline, though they don't follow a nonlinear approach to time used in both the

medieval text and film. Instead, they begin with the “Prologue: Brecca’s Challenge,” in which the gamer plays out the legendary swim against Brecca in which Beowulf battles three sea monsters. Once the Beowulf-gamer “defeats” Grendel’s mother, the game continues a linear approach, tackling the “absent” years that both the text and film leave out in their narrative. Beowulf wakes up and is surprised to find himself King of the Danes – the video game leaves out the death of Hrothgar and instead chooses to leave the reasons for his kingship a mystery. It may be noted, however, that this exclusion has been noted by Candace Barrington and Timothy English to be a “continuity gap [that], though confusing, does have the effect of emphasizing the disastrous effects of Beowulf’s carnal choice by juxtaposing his resubmission to Grendel’s mother against...news of the kingdom’s turmoil” (37).

After Beowulf wakes up, the gamer is introduced to the Legacy system, which keeps tracks of the gamer’s actions. These actions “ – CARNAL or HEROIC – will...ultimately DETERMINE the LEGACY” the gamer leaves to the Danes (see Figure A1 in Appendix). This legacy system introduces an entirely new set of rule for gameplay, which will influence the ideological politics discussed in chapter four. In order to gamify the narrative, Ubisoft introduces two skills the player will choose between. The first, “Carnal Fury” (see Figure A2), is given to Beowulf by Grendel’s mother during his fight against the sea monsters in the beginning of the game. As seen in Figures A3, A4, A5, and A6 in the Appendix, the gamer is given explicit directions for the action of Carnal Fury. In the first image, the gamer is warned that “CARNAL FURY is as DEADLY as it is COSTLY...Use it and pay the price.” The next image (Figure A4) again warns of the “temptation” of the skill. In Figure A5, the gamer is given directions – the action can be used by pressing and holding R2, the “trigger” button found at the top right of a controller. This button is one of the most commonly used buttons in fighting games, as it is

easily accessible and can be used quickly. The powers of HEROISM (see Figure A7), on the other hand, only have two images, neither of which display how to use the power in battle. Heroism gives power to not only the Beowulf-gamer, but also to his band of thanes. In addition, the second screen tells you that “Heroism IS life.” Throughout the game, the Beowulf-gamer must choose which skill (Carnal or Heroism) to use, ultimately choosing whether they wish to be known as a “MONSTER SLAYER” or “HERO KING.” However, in some instances Carnal Fury is both necessary and required. This gameplay structure sets up a game-world ideology that the gamer both shapes and takes part in.

Reimagining the medieval world to reflect modern concerns

The imagined game-world that Ubisoft crafts thus leads to a discussion of medieval remediation. One of the leading medievalism scholars and founding editor of the journal *Studies in Medievalism*, Leslie Workman, defines *medievalism* as “the study of scholarship which has created the Middle Ages we know, ideals and models derived from the Middle Ages, and the relations between them” (1). Tom Shippey adds to Workman’s definition, saying that “[a]ny post-medieval attempt to re-imagine the Middle Ages, or some aspect of the Middle Ages, for the modern world, in any of many different media” is included in medievalism (45). However, Richard Utz adds to medievalism by defining neomedievalism, a concept especially relevant to game studies. Neomedievalism envelops texts that “no longer strive for the authenticity of original manuscripts, castles, or cathedrals, but create pseudo-medieval worlds that playfully obliterate history and historical accuracy and replace history-based narratives with simulacra of the medieval, employing images that are neither an original nor the copy of an original, but altogether Neo [sic]” (v). This is appropriately understood in tangent with remediation, defined by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin as simply the “representation of one medium in

another” (45). Bolter and Grusin’s concept of remediation is what they term “borrowing” (45), and it is not unique to new media – the same process can be identified “throughout the last several hundred years of Western visual representation” (11). What is new are the *ways* new media remediates older media. David T. Kline explains this well with the example of a palimpsest. A palimpsest is a medieval text in which the original has been scraped off and a new text placed on the vellum. In his discussion of *medievalism*, and specifically *neomedievalism*, Kline notes that a neomedieval palimpsest reveals “the hidden layers of earlier texts but also [provides] a fresh gloss on already-known narratives” (5). Thus, remediation and medievalism are intricately tied together in how contemporary audiences, and indeed scholars, interpret the Middle Ages.

Kline’s neomedieval palimpsest is a fitting description for *Beowulf: The Game*, a text which reimagines both a story and a (semi-)historical past in ways that are more representative of its contemporary culture than of the medieval culture it recreates. Tison Pugh and Angela Jane Weisl note that understanding this palimpsest “becomes a methodology for understanding the production of cultural and historical fantasies out of the fragments of real material,” thus better understanding the culture that creates the fantasy (6). As Pugh and Weisl argue, it is important to understand “how and why the artists...create this particular past, in whichever historical, semi-historical, or magical incarnation they desire” (4). These scholars, among others, will inform my own analysis of *Beowulf: The Game* when considering how medieval remediation appropriates and molds the medieval *Beowulf*’s ideology of leadership into a fresh, “modern” ideological lesson.

A narratological and remediative analysis drawn from New Media theory and applied to *Beowulf: The Game*, in addition to a historicist approach to the medieval *Beowulf*, demonstrates

that the medieval epic celebrates leadership qualities based on concepts of justness, similar to those outlined in other ancient and medieval works, such as Augustine's concept of *rex justus*, the just king. The traits of a *rex justus* are synonymous with what Levin L. Schücking defines as medieval fatherly qualities, and thus Beowulf is ruled by "wisdom, piety, and kindness" (39). The medieval *Beowulf* thus dismisses as bad leadership what Augustine terms *rex injustus* [unjust king], or the qualities "of the 'radix vitorum' ['root of vices'], 'superbia' ['pride'] or 'amor sui' ['love of self']" (Schücking 39). The film, while similarly condemning vices and pride, nevertheless ignores the medieval concepts of wisdom and piety. The video game strikes a middle ground, considering wisdom, piety, and kindness as good qualities, while also highlighting battle and political strategy. Thus, the game presents an ideology split into good and evil, obscuring the complicated moral of the medieval poem. The considerable remediations of both Zemeckis' adaptation and the video game are ideologically, contextually, and narratively different from their original source. These remediations transform Beowulf's leadership from one exhibiting traits of the *rex justus*, to one exhibiting the modern adaptor's concept of the barbaric leader.

Narrative remediation for new media

In the preface to the third edition of *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, Mieke Bal addresses the edition's inclusion of film. Through her recent work in creating films, she realized not only that the field of film, and the relevance of narratology, is growing but also that "narratological issues [have an importance place in] the construction – as much as [the] viewing – of visual narratives" (xvii-xviii). Bal provides the structure of a narrative system, and provides definitions for words that are at the heart of narrative theory. Her introduction to and definitions of a narrative system's layers – text, story, fabula – remind us

that, though ripe for some amount of individual analysis, each layer does not exist individually (7).⁶ Rather, the importance of these layers lie in their ability to sift through a text's meanings and elements to uncover the potential influence on its readers (7). Seymour Benjamin Chatman provides a useful, though terminologically different, breakdown of a narrative text, and defines both *story* and *discourse*:

Structuralist theory argues that each narrative has two parts: a story (*histoire*), the content or chain of event (actions, happenings), plus what may be called the existents (characters, items of setting); and a discourse (*discours*), that is, the expression, the means by which the content is communicated. In simple terms, the story is the *what* in a narrative that is depicted, discourse the *how*. (19)⁷

Both Bal and Chatman recognize the importance of the depiction of *story* across media. Jesper Juul points out in *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* that video games present a level of difficulty when studying narrative. Indeed, as a ludologist, Juul tends to align with the designation that video games should not be looked at for their stories due to the role of the player as an uncertain variable. Juul argues that this is because definitions in narrative theory vary significantly, and that the definition used affects the outcome of the study.

Juul points to five different definitions of narrative⁸ that are relatively wide-spread/agreed-upon, and considers the challenges of each. However, Juul does not discuss Mieke

⁶ For how to describe the total components of text, story, and fabula – see Bal's introduction, where she points to these as "characteristics" that "serve as the point of departure for the next phase: a description of the way in which each narrative text is constructed" (3).

⁷ Bal's terminology will be favored in the duration of this paper; Chatman's language, however, makes two details clear: (1) narratology, while practiced by many scholars who differ in their terminology, has a foundation on the layering present within narrative texts, and (2) though using different language, both Chatman and Bal agree that the medium of the text affects the overall message.

⁸ Juul condenses these five definitions in *Half-Real*: Bordwell 1985 and Chatman 1978: "Narrative as the presentation of a number of events; Brooks 1984/1992: Narrative as a fixed and predetermined sequence of events; Prince 1987: Narrative as a specific type of sequence of events; Grodal 1997: Narrative as a specific type of theme –

Bal and her definition, and this limits how he views story in video game. Bal considers a story to be layered, and her definition of narrative implies a system that can bridge the gap between an unstructured definition like Henry Jenkins' (narrative as any kind of setting or fictional world) and the potentially too-structured – for video games, which are anything but *fixed* – definition that Peter Brooks gives (narrative as a *fixed* and predetermined sequence of events). Bal defines narrative as a text conveyed “to an addressee...[by an agent or subject]...a story in a particular medium” (5).

What is important to the study of *Beowulf* across media, however, is the discussion of the addressee, and of the agents within the text, story, and fabula. By understanding what each of these entities are, and how they *act*, within the *Beowulf* texts, we can begin to sense the relationship between audience and text. Identifying these agents is imperative to a study of the characterization of the Middle Ages. A *narrator* relates the story to recipients, and “cannot be identified with the writer, painter composer, or filmmaker” (Bal 9). There are two main types of narrators we will discuss in relation to *Beowulf*. The first, an external narrator (EN), is “a narrator that tells about others” (Bal 21). The second narrator is a character-based narrator (CN), who is “identified with a character, hence, also an actor in the fabula” (21). These latter two terms (character, actor), often seen as the same entity, is the “anthropomorphic figure, called ‘actor’ in the study of the fabula” and “*character*” in the story (Bal 9, my emphasis). The narrator works *with* these figures; when direct speech occurs, “the narrator temporarily transfers this function” of speech to the actor (Bal 9). Considering these agents within each layer of the text can present possibilities of comprehension. Bal’s explanation that “the series of events that is presented in a story answers to the same rules as those controlling human behavior” makes it

humans or anthropomorphic entities; Jenkins 2003: Narrative as any kind of setting or fictional world; Schank and Abelson 1977: Narrative as the way we make sense of the world (Juul 156-7).

clear that narratology can be used as a tool for better understanding human behavior, via the rules that govern both humans and the text's actors. (7). By revealing how each agent in the texts are treated, paying special attention to which aspect or element of the layers they are altering, narrative theory can play an imperative role in identifying a text's cultural influence, and how the actions of the agents in each text can help uncover the ideological messages within each text. These rules also allow the reader to comprehend the ideology of the narrator, and in some ways the author and their culture.

Because my study spans several forms of media and hundreds of years, I employ narrative theory, not just as an end goal of itself, but as a means of analyzing how narrative can construct ideological systems within texts. In combination with remediation, narratology provides an approach to understand how cultural remediation shapes the discursive steps taken by each of the *Beowulf* texts. My thesis will thus consider the differences that arise from remediation: the medieval *Beowulf* denies the possibility of perfection but still embraces the notion that no leader is perfect; however, even an imperfect leader can still be a good one. While Zemeckis' *Beowulf* takes a more somber note, implying that leaders will succumb to lust for power or sex and this will be the ruin of their society, *Beowulf: The Game* strikes a middle ground by presenting the potential for a leader who begins with imperfections and must struggle with and overcome them to successfully defend their people and their beliefs.

In chapter two, "Augustinian Influence on Medieval Literature," I identify a heroic standard within medieval literature and points to a theme of leadership influenced by Christianity and blended with Germanic virtues and morals. I consider two works contemporary to *Beowulf*: *The Battle of Maldon*, the account of a lost battle in 991, and *The Wanderer*, the lament of a warrior who has lost his lord and, thus, his home. In both, a certain expectation of honor and

wisdom is held in esteem by each respective author. Chapter three, “*Rex Justus* in the Medieval *Beowulf*,” considers how these Augustinian and Germanic codes of leadership are represented in *Beowulf*, and points to the *Beowulf* poet’s understanding of different presentations of the heroic leader.

Finally, in “Redeeming Heroes: Narrative Choice in *Beowulf: The Game*,” I analyze how *Beowulf: The Game* appropriates the medieval text’s complicated morals, while simultaneously redeeming Zemeckis’ flawed characters. Both of these texts subvert and change the location and agency of Hrothgar to present a very different idea of heroic leadership. As I show in chapter one, the medieval *Beowulf* values Augustinian concepts of leadership, and Hrothgar is thus presented as wise, merciful, and generous. The video game redeems the lustful and self-indulgent Hrothgar of the Zemeckis film and presents a more moderate view; while Hrothgar regains his wisdom and respect, he is still at the mercy of his own vices, and is seen as a character who has learned too late the values he narrates to the *Beowulf*-gamer. In my conclusion, I will reflect on the ideological messages that are crafted from the small narratological changes to the story in the film and the video game. While the film focuses on the loss of heroism through a Freudian and Lacanian lens nonexistent in the medieval *Beowulf*, the video game once more takes a middle ground, morphing Hrothgar into an anti-hero whose mistakes are presented for the new hero, the *Beowulf*-gamer, to attempt to avoid.

AUGUSTINIAN INFLUENCE ON MEDIEVAL LITERATURE

It is unnecessary to point out that Augustine is immensely important to the study of western medieval Christianity.⁹ It is also just as apparent that Augustine's writing was both popular and influential in the Middle Ages. Copies of his *Confessions* and *City of God* survive from the fifth century on, and they became even more numerous in the tenth and eleventh centuries (Evans liii). While the hundreds of copies from the late Middle Ages are not necessarily an indication of a revival (later manuscripts will, of course, survive longer than older manuscripts), Augustine's work was certainly popular for centuries after he died.

The philosophy and themes in *City of God* made their way into the writing of many medieval authors and philosophers, as G. R. Evans points out in his introduction to the Penguin edition of the text. He writes, "Augustine's book had an immediate influence on writers who consciously carried forward his themes in work of their own" (Evans liv). Evans also points out that authors after Augustine's time drew "from *City of God* in a variety of ways, in the context of the fashions of thought and guiding preoccupations of their own time" (lv). Augustine's ideas, therefore, might have subconsciously made their way into writer's works or could simply represent a broad consensus of political ideology.

In texts like *Beowulf*, poets paint over Germanic scenes with Christian overtones, not only in terms of religion but also with values of court relationships and leadership. *Beowulf* is a Germanic hero through his craft of boasting and compassionate relationship with his warriors, but when Augustinian values are taken into consideration, *Beowulf* is also a Christian hero.

⁹ Kristine Haney points this out when discussing the Laurenziana manuscript of *City of God* in "The Reception of St. Augustine's 'City of God' in Anglo-Norman Canterbury" (61), as does Evans in his introduction to the Penguin edition of *City of God*; additionally, John M. Warner and John T. Scott write in "Sin City: Augustine and Machiavelli's Reordering of Rome" that the text was "the most influential interpretation of Rome available to the Middle Ages," and that "[Augustine's] scathing critique of Roman virtue remained influential in the Renaissance era" (858).

Thus, in *Beowulf*, Christian and Germanic values blend, providing a backdrop for the discussion of destiny, wisdom, and human limitation. In *A History of English Literature*, Michael Alexander notes that the balance of Christian and Germanic ideas satisfies a pride in ancestry, and shows the medieval “English the world of their ancestors, the heroic world of the north, a world both glorious and heathen” (27). However, the Germanic qualities by no means diminish the overtones of Augustinian thought, just as Christian ideologies do not overwhelm the Germanic values. Schücking argues that Beowulf is, like the narrator of *The Wanderer*, a balanced hero, a hero who “unites in an ideal manner pride and modesty, devotion to God with self-confidence, daring with caution, joie de vivre with piety, who enjoys possessions but is not greedy, who is thankful, pious, and reverent towards age” (47). Beowulf, then, is the elusive Christian heathen, a blending of ideals that bring two cultures together and acknowledge an admiration of history and the necessary ideologies of the present.

The popularity of Augustine reflects a cultural archetype of medieval leadership, the complexities of which are lost in most modern adaptations of medieval literature and historical events. The *Beowulf*-poet’s heroes – Beowulf, but also Hrothgar – are wise and just, two traits that the later Hollywood and Ubisoft adaptations both diminish and desecrate. However, these traits are vital to their roles as a just king, what Augustine refers to as a “*rex justus*”. The *Beowulf*-poet instills both heroes with many Augustinian values, as do several of its contemporary texts.

The Concept of Rex Justus in Augustine

As many began to blame Christianity for the decline of the Roman Empire, Augustine set to work defending his beliefs and reassuring fellow Christians in *City of God*. While defending Christianity, Augustine also presents a vivid image of Roman justice and politics. Augustine was

writing about leadership values in a time when Church ideals and Germanic morals were beginning to blend together, and while his voice is not the only one, his distilling of kingship and justice is practical for examining how these ideals presented themselves in contemporary writing.

In Book V, Augustine discusses felicity, a gift of happiness bestowed only by God. He discusses fate, the definition and, in some ways, refutation of destiny, and the will of God, and what felicity means for a king. What distinguishes “happy” Christian emperors from demon-worshipping pagans is not, Augustine claims, the enjoyment of a long reign, a peaceful transition of the throne, the subduing of enemies, and the “rewards and consolations” that follow these actions (219). Instead, in one of *City of God*'s most influential passages, he lays out the following traits of a happy ruler, a *rex justus*, a “just” king. The traits he identifies can be condensed into six rules, or qualities, of a good leader.

First, Augustine claims that a ruler is called happy by Christians only “if they rule with justice” (220). Second, rulers must “not [be] inflated with pride, but remember that they are but men” (Saint Augustine 220). They must be reasonably humble. Third, writes Augustine, a ruler should not only fear, love and worship God, but their power should be used “at the service of God’s majesty, to extend his worship far and wide” (220). The fourth virtue Augustine ascribes to a ‘happy’ ruler is that of wisdom. Leaders, he claims, must be “slow to punish, but ready to pardon...take vengeance on wrong because of the necessity to direct and protect the state, and not to satisfy their personal animosity...[and]...grant pardon not to allow impunity to wrongdoing but in the hope of amendment of the wrong-doer” (220). A leader must know when to act with action, when with words, and when to pardon, which leads into his fifth quality of a leader. If called upon to act harshly, a leader must “compensate this with the gentleness of their mercy and the generosity of their benefits” (Saint Augustine 220). Finally, Augustine names self-

restraint as an inherent quality of a just ruler. A good king will “restrain their self-indulgent appetites all the more because they are more free to gratify them, and prefer to have command over their lower desires than over any number of subject peoples” (220).

These six qualities, he argues, are at the heart of the Roman Empire and its Christian rulers. Levin L. Schücking simplifies these six qualities to three values, writing that “The teaching of Augustine...spiritualizes the authoritative office by asking from its bearer above all wisdom, piety, and kindness...” (39). Augustine’s writing is not isolated – his traits of a just king are reminiscent of the virtues and vices of the Church,¹⁰ and many of these qualities are also inherent in Germanic morals and values, as Schücking points out later. Each of these six rules find their way into various texts of the Middle Ages, and it is against these rules that Beowulf and Hrothgar’s leadership is measured.

The Concept of Rex Justus in Works Contemporary to Beowulf

Augustinian leadership makes its ways into several texts from the Middle Ages, especially texts from the mid- to late Middle Ages. Poems such as *The Seafarer*, *The Dream of the Rood*, and the *Wife’s Lament* have references to compassionate and wise leadership¹¹, while other texts more visibly address components of good leadership. Two such texts, *The Wanderer* and *The Battle of Maldon*, provide clear context for the prevalence of Augustinian heroism found in *Beowulf*. *The Wanderer*, found only in the Exeter Book, represents most clearly the Augustinian values present in several other Exeter poems and elegies; where *The Seafarer* may nod to good leadership, heroic values are at the forefront of *The Wanderer* and can begin to

¹⁰ For example, “Formula Honestae Vitae” by Martin of Braga (6th century), a widespread work in which the virtue of the Church are laid out: “prudence (‘prudentia’), justice (‘justitia’), courage (‘fortitudo’), and temperance (‘temperantia’) (Schücking 46).

¹¹ Michael Alexander writes in *A History of English Literature* that “the Christian heroism of *The Dream of the Rood* redirected old pagan heroism” and its heroic code of loyalty and sacrifice “to a heavenly lord” (22). He also notes that *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, both heroic elegies, as well as *The Ruin*, “appropriate heroic motifs for the purpose of a Christian wisdom” (31).

explain the complex emotions and actions exhibited by characters in *Beowulf*. While there is a consensus for the approximate date of its copying into the Exeter Book (~975), scholars are less certain of the date of *The Wanderer's* original writing. Many agree, however, that it was written between the eighth and tenth centuries. Similarly, the date of creation for *The Battle of Maldon* is unknown, though it was clearly written after the events of the actual Battle of Maldon in 991. Because of its relation of actual events, in which Anglo-Saxons unsuccessfully defended against Viking invaders, the text provides a unique look at how heroic traits were ascribed to actual medieval leaders. Both texts articulate Augustinian values; however, while *The Wanderer* is a sincere expression of these values, *The Battle of Maldon* subverts Augustinian heroic qualities and satirizes the historical leaders who ineffectively practice them.

In *The Wanderer*, direct discussion of kingship ideals is absent, but the personality ideal of a “wise man” sets an expectation for a just leader. Justness, in *The Wanderer*, is expressed through generosity of heart and the wisdom of men, leaders, and kings alike. While the narrator speaks only of the “wise man” or even simply a “man,” rather than “leader” or “king,” he identifies personality traits that must be modeled by a successful leader. Schücking, referring to the resolution and “firmness of will” (48) mentioned in both *Beowulf* and *The Wanderer* (70-72), finds that in many ways, the personality ideal and kingship ideal mimic each other in their mixture of Germanic and Christian qualities (49). The narrator of *The Wanderer* affirms this through the bond of a leader and his retainers; rather than explicitly ascribing traits of heroic values to a lord, the narrator’s personal traits of trust and devotion towards his “loved lord” leads readers to trust that the lord was an exemplary leader (49).¹² He laments the loss of his lord, and in his suffering the reader empathizes with the compassionate relationship that exists between a

¹² Quotes from *The Wanderer* and *The Battle of Maldon* taken from Michael Alexander, *The First Poems in English* (pp. 51-4, 95-104).

leader and his warriors. The narrator's heart is "all the heavier" wounded because he is "sore for his loved lord" (44-45). His lord's generosity is clear, not because it is explicitly written, but because of the devotion of his warriors for their leader. He reminds readers, through his joy to "claspeth and kisseth, and on [his lord's] knee layeth hand and head" (40-42), that the "gift-stool" (43)¹³ is more than just a necessary part of a Germanic court – it is also a compassionate and devotional relationship (experienced and carried out by both a leader and his men). This emotional bond, an eminent feature of Germanic relationships between a leader and his followers, conveniently showcases the generosity of a leader for his people. The narrator's memory of gift-giving is not just a necessary tradition, but a blessing of generosity, a "generosity...of benefits," that reveals a gentle and gracious kinship (Saint Augustine 220).

After the moving elegy to his lord and his fellow kinsmen, the narrator embarks on the definition of a wise man. This juxtaposition, along with the positive language that defines his lord, leads the reader to associate these traits of wisdom to the leader. Thus, while the narrator speaks only of the "wise man" or even simply a "man," rather than the "king" or a "leader" in the section that regards wisdom (lines 64-94), he is also identifying traits that must be modeled by a successful, just leader, both in terms of Germanic ideals and Augustinian values. And, according to the narrator, one of the most important traits ascribed to a wise man is the precise articulation of language. Not only does he say that a wise man is never "too hasty in speech" (66), but he also warns that a wise man must never be "too eager to boast, ere he knows all" (69). Further: "A man should forbear boastmaking until his fierce mind fully knows which way his spleen shall expend itself" (70-73). In nine lines of description (he goes on further, but whereas these nine lines are purely definitional, the next lines go further than a simple definition and begin to

¹³ Or, in other translations, "gift-giving," the bearing of gold and belongings upon a lord's loyal men.

include reactions to the surroundings of this wise man), speech and thoughtfulness take up six lines of text. Thoughtful speech is tantamount to leadership, in both Germanic-heroic and Stoic-Christian values.

For a contemporary audience, the surface-level “theatricality of these ceremonial speeches of self-praise belies their utter seriousness,” says Dwight Conquergood in his article “Boasting in Anglo-Saxon England: Performance and the Heroic Ethos” (24). Boasts were not merely bragging, as is commonly perceived in present culture, but rather an oath of action. The past action of the boast, in which the boaster declares what they have already done, acts to set a precedent for the hero, and his boast would launch him into (and hold them to) “courses of action which had life and death consequences” (Conquergood 24). Boasting, then, is really the gift of oration, and, as Gustav Neckel notes, gifted oration is “always well-becoming to a Germanic king” (qtd in Schücking 42). However, as Schücking continues, in “the Christian ideal of a king...this feature is particularly prominent” (42). In *City of God*, wisdom is maintained as the forethought of language and mercy – a leader, Augustine writes, must know when to act with words, rather than with action (22). Ultimately, then, *The Wanderer* is an amalgamation of Germanic-heroic and Stoic-Christian values, holding in highest esteem wisdom and language, comradery and generosity.

The Battle of Maldon also highlights wisdom, language, and camaraderie, but these heroic values, when placed within the actions of real men, fall short and create a paradoxical mourning and mockery of Augustinian heroism. In his *Anthology of British Literature*, Abrams notes that the unknown poet was “apparently well versed in heroic English poetry of the type of *Beowulf*, and he does a brilliant job of adapting traditional epic mannerism to his description of a local battle of no particular historical importance” (70). By bestowing heroic qualities on

“inexperienced farmers and laborers...[and] a small group of [inexperienced] aristocrats” (70-71), the poet manages to leave the contemporary audience somewhat unsure of his original purpose and tone in the writing of this poem. Read one way, the poem mourns the fall of heroism – while the men act bravely, heroism fails them and they are overtaken – but read in another way, the poet could perhaps be mocking the aristocrats, who perhaps, according to the poem at least, failed their people due to their faith in heroic values.

When Bryhtnoth speaks, he is eloquent and confident, displaying a wisdom of words that is reminiscent of the wise Beowulf (He is “wis wordcwida”, or a wise/good orator). After a Viking herald is sent to request surrender, he replies with a heroic boast: “there stands here ‘mid his men not the meanest of Earls, pledged to fight in this lands defence...*In this fight the heathen shall fall*. It would be a shame for your trouble if you should with our silver away to ship without fight offered...But English silver is not so softly won: first iron and edge shall make arbitrament harsh war-trial, ere we yield tribute” (51-61, emphasis my own). He is confident in his words, revealing bravery that belies the retinue of farmers and laborers behind him. The Earl fights with the same confident eloquence, “heartening his men,” and bidding them “go forward, good companions,” though he is no longer able to stand (169-71). After he has encouraged his men, he gives his death-speech, giving thanks to “Lord God of hosts, for [he has] known in this world a wealth of gladness” (173-74). Immediately after his show of piety – above all, the most important Augustinian trait of a happy ruler – he is “hewed” down by “the heathen churls” (181). This contrast serves to both highlight the respectable piety of the Earl (heroic elegy), just as it displays utter uselessness of his action (heroic satire). The heroic serves no real purpose against the reality of Vikings and village defense guards.

Bryhtnoth is, in all cases, the traditional hero, but his heroic actions lead to tragedy. When he refuses to accept their offer of “buying [their] peace at [their] price,” pledging to fight till the end, Bryhtnoth heroically refuses to be bought, but his actions incur tragic ends for his land anyways – whereas at least Beowulf’s sacrifice to the dragon does, in the short-term, save his people temporarily, Bryhtnoth’s sacrifice leaves his people even worse off than before. Bryhtnoth is again reminiscent of Beowulf when he allows the Vikings to land and fight; Beowulf refuses to use a sword against Grendel, but where he is successful, Bryhtnoth leaves his people in peril. The poet sneers at Bryhtnoth’s decision when he describes the event, claiming that “the Earl was overswayed by his heart’s arrogance” (89). And yet, this arrogance is yet again portrayed elegantly, as he poetically calls across the water that “The ground is cleared for you: come quickly to us, gather to battle. God alone knows who shall carry the wielding of this waste ground” (93-95). Abram notes that though this decision was possibly made due to much more practical reasons than Beowulf’s casting off of his sword, in the poem the decision “to let the Vikings cross the river is treated in the epic manner as an instance of heroic overconfidence...[and] in this case it is a gesture that leads to tragic doom” (71). George Clark, in his article “*The Battle of Maldon: A Heroic Poem*,” argues that the poem actually attempts to recall heroism (a mourning that suggests potential return); he writes that “Byrhtnoth’s reference to Æthelred explicitly sets the poem in an unheroic, indeed a debased age, but *The Battle of Maldon* extols a heroic standard of action” (59). When identifying the unique qualities of what he calls “medieval journalism” (458), Edward B. Irving, Jr. claims what Abrams calls “overconfidence” and what even the poem calls “arrogance”, is simply “inevitable” (“*The Heroic*” 462). Whether or not the poet is mourning or mocking traditional heroism, then, Bryhtnoth stands as a clear model of Augustinian piety, wisdom, and kindness.

The camaraderie of a leader and his retainers is also mourned/mockered in *The Battle of Maldon*. As Irving acknowledges, Byrhtnoth's invitation to the Vikings to land is, ironically, a symbol of "the other heroic virtue of generosity, the virtue essential to great kings and princes" ("The Heroic" 462). But his generosity is also visible in the relationship between him and his retainers, and the adjectives applied to him after his death. After he is hewn down, Godric leaves the battle, "betray[ing] the lord who had made him a gift of many good horses" (196-97). The men who stay are devoted and pledge their vengeance for their "goldgiving lord," their "openhanded lord" who Leofsunu refers to not only as a lord, but also as a "friend" (279, 290, 248). When Offa falls, he has "made good his given word...Thane-like he lay at his lord's hand" (279, 284). Irving, addressing the formulaic call of each retainer to stand their ground, notes that "heroism in *Maldon* still tends to be social and cooperative" ("The Heroic" 465). Thus, what the poem highlights, above all, is the Germanic code of brotherhood, or the Augustinian model of kindness between a ruler and his people.

Thus, three traits, above all, are required of any just king. First, leaders are compassionate and care for their thanes, and have earned the love and respect of their thanes in return. Second, all leaders must be wise in their decisions, though the way wisdom presents itself in different leaders may be more or less battle-active or diplomatic. And finally, leaders must think carefully before they act, an action that generally takes the form of "boasting" in medieval texts like *The Wanderer* or *The Battle of Maldon*. Medieval leadership was multi-faceted and complex in its presentation, something that later adaptations of texts and events like *Beowulf* fail to take into account. In subsequent chapters, we will consider how these traits are complicated and examined in *Beowulf*'s description of three very different heroes, before examining the ways in which Zemeckis and Ubisoft rewrote and simplified morals and values of *Beowulf*'s leaders; while they

ignored the context of medieval leadership, we can go forward in understanding these adaptations' isolation of various aspects of leadership within a more culturally- and historically-informed context.

REX JUSTUS IN THE MEDIEVAL BEOWULF

Beowulf relies heavily on adjectives of praise and glory when describing all characters, even when their actions seem to deny their goodness or kingliness. By the time Beowulf arrives in Heorot, for example, King Hrothgar has failed to defeat Grendel and yet he is respected and acts respectably. He is depicted as wise, compassionate, and sober (in both senses of the word). Beowulf is represented similarly, though as a younger and somewhat-less mature version in the first two parts. However, by the time he fights the dragon, fifty years after helping Hrothgar, he has developed into a similarly wise and elderly king. The medieval *Beowulf* is split into three parts: in the first, a young Beowulf comes to the rescue of Hrothgar and the Danes, defeating the monster Grendel in the great hall of Heorot. In part two, Beowulf must defeat Grendel's mother in her underwater home, the mere. Finally, in part three, set fifty years later, Beowulf defeats a dragon in a final battle that fatally wounds him. All three parts highlight Beowulf's qualities as a leader, a fighter, and ultimately as a king. However, it is not Beowulf's value as a leader that interests me; his heroism is well-established, and has been discussed by many before me. What really establishes *Beowulf* as a celebration of Germanic-Augustinian heroism are the kings who model wisdom, prudence, and generosity in part one.

The first part of the story is composed of several models of leadership for Beowulf to learn from. The legend of Scyld focuses on his battle-prowess, while the elderly Hrothgar is regarded as wise. However, these are not the only models of heroism – Beow, Halfdane, Hygelac, Wealhtheow, and even God present heroic traits that contribute to the audience's conception of exemplary leadership. By beginning with the ancestry of Hrothgar, the poet sets, rather than *one* standard of heroic leadership, multiple examples of successful leadership for Beowulf, and his readers, to follow. The *Beowulf*-poet represents different modes and

expressions of leadership in different stages of life, thus allowing a more complex and flexible perspective of heroism and leadership than modern adaptations like Zemeckis' *Beowulf* give their viewers.

The Legendary Hero(es)

In the very first line of the epic poem, the narrator lays out the theme of the story. "So," he declares in Seamus Heaney's translation, "The Spear-Danes in days gone by / and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness" (1-2). The kings mentioned are described with differing emphases of competence, but all of them adhere to the overall theme of courage and greatness. However, it is often primarily Scyld who is given the title of the "legendary" paradigm. Scyld is given a bulky thirty-four lines, his son Beow sixteen and a half lines, and Beow's heir, Halfdane, a mere three (and a half) lines.¹⁴ In the course of the prologue, admittedly, Scyld's story is one of legend, but Beow, the "famous son" (18) and Halfdane the "great" (57) are equally courageous and great.

Ultimately then, though a story of legend, Scyld is just one example of heroism. This is most clear when, after seemingly focusing solely on Scyld, the narrator reminds us, "Þæt wæs gōd cyning!" (11). The Old English phrase has been treated differently by translators. J.R.R. Tolkien claims, 'a good king was he!', while Michael Alexander chooses the simple "He was a good king!" Kevin Crossley-Holland, somewhat boldly, writes that Scyld "was a noble king!" All these translations use the article 'a.' Heaney's translation, however, chooses differently. He translates, "That was one good king" Not only does he decide to exchange the traditional 'a' for 'one,' he also forgoes the exclamation at the end of the sentence.

¹⁴ Scyld: ff. 4-11, 26-52; Beow: ff. 12-24,53-6; Halfdane: 56-9.

This decision, though seemingly innocuous, actually emphasizes a point that is perhaps forgotten in other translations. *One*, in many ways, portrays the idea that Scyld is only *one* of many models of successful kings. In a reading of his text, Heaney reads the phrase with an emphasis on *one*: “That was *one* good king.” The librivox recording of the text, using the Gummere translation, reads with an emphasis, “A good king *he!*” Because Heaney’s translation is possibly the most accessible, publicly-read version of *Beowulf*, the way the text is interpreted by those who don’t study the intricacies of Old English makes this small change momentarily important. With the decision to move to *one*, Heaney removes the potential interpretation of “sole” modeling, and allows the general public to remember that leadership is not just one *thing*; rather, it is a plethora of options, of potential. In his *Introduction to Beowulf*, Edward B. Irving notes, as other scholars have before, that in beginning with the story of Scyld, the poet is “furnishing us here with *a* heroic paradigm, *a* role-model for the hero of the poem” (36, my emphases). The narrator, it must be reminded, doesn’t begin with Scyld. Instead, he writes, the “*kings...had courage and greatness*” (3). Scyld isn’t the only great king, and his son, the “famous” Beow (3), rules with prudence, with the wisdom that in building relationships during his father’s reign, he will be sure of “steadfast companions” (5). His heir, Halfdane, is “great” and a “fighter prince,” a “warlord” who is again powerful in battle. These three men, all considered great, rule their kingdom with the wisdom to exert force, and kindness, as necessary.

So, while Irving calls Scyld a “heroic paradigm,” it must be remembered that he is *a* heroic paradigm, *one* of many. Nickolas Haydock, in *Beowulf on Film: Adaptations and Variations*, adeptly terms Scyld the inaugurator of the heroic age (117), and thus Scyld sets off the beginning of a variety of heroes. Thus, in the medieval *Beowulf*, as in modern literature (and indeed, the “real” world), a hero isn’t one-dimensional, and not all heroes, whether legendary or

not, claim an identical set of qualities. Rather, the qualities they do have are varied, while still managing to hold true to “courage and greatness” (2), the very descriptors of which all kings of the Spear-Danes held. Thus, Scyld is esteemed as a legend, but even with his thirty-four lines of verse (twenty-six of which regard his death), his son Beow, and his descendant Halfdane are just as great and courageous. It is simply Scyld’s place at the beginning of the era that justifies the author’s decision to expand his story to such lengths.

As demonstrated in the last chapter, a successful leader could be relied upon to have compassion for his followers, be wise in his decisions, and be prudent in his actions. What is interesting is that these traits are highlighted in Beow, while they are actually underrepresented (though often implied) in Scyld’s character. Rather than wisdom, prudence, and compassion, Scyld portrays most the strong warrior and defender of his lands. And this is not surprising: Michael Alexander notes that “The heroic way of life – magnificent, hospitable and courageous – depends upon military success” (*History* 30). And it is important to remember that, though Augustine didn’t highlight military success in quite the same way that the heroic code does, their end goals and reasons for success are the same: they involve and are due to “obligations to lord, to family and to guest” (*History* 30). Scyld is described almost exclusively through his battle prowess, and it is in his warrior-status that he is great. In the opening lines, the poet writes:

There was Shield Sheafson, scourge of many tribes,
a wrecker of mead-benches, rampaging among foes,

This terror of the hall-troops had come far. (4-6)

This battle-language is consistent across translation, and Scyld “flourishes” or “prosper” (Heaney, Crossley-Holland) by the grace of God. Additionally, his funeral ship is a reminder of his warrior-status; he is buried in “precious gear” (37). In fact, the narrator has “never before

heard of a ship so well furbished / with battle tackle, bladed weapons / and coats of mail” (38-40). In contrast, it is only even suggested that Beow will face fighting.¹⁵ Scyld led through battle, but “the poet exclaims...[is that]...what has been won by force must now be maintained by other means” (Irving *Introduction* 21). Beow acts accordingly, and maintains an identity that is much more Augustinian in nature.

Additionally, while the majority of the prologue is spent describing Scyld’s funeral, the portion dedicated to Beow spends time documenting Beow’s actual behaviors and actions as a leader. While the narrator ends Scyld’s introduction with “That was one good king” (11), he ends Beow’s introduction with a similar but far more engaged observation – he notes that “Behavior that’s admired / is the path to power among people everywhere” (24-5). Scyld may have “rampag[ed] among foes” (5), but Beow was “prudent...giving freely while his father lives” (21-2). The narrator bestows admiration upon Beow generosity and prudence, rather than highlighting his fighting:

Shield had fathered a famous son:
Beow’s name was known through the north.
And a young prince must be prudent like that,
giving freely while his father lives
so that afterwards in age when fighting starts
steadfast companions will stand by him
and hold the line. Behavior that’s admired
is the path to power among people everywhere. (18-25)

¹⁵ The poet, in admiring Beow’s wisdom, mentions that his generosity was wise because it would ensure that “afterwards in age when fighting starts / steadfast companions will stand by him / and hold the line” (22-3).

It is in these lines that Beowulf's strengths are shown. He is above all prudent – his actions towards his people are thoughtful in care of the need for future alliances. He is compassionate – he is generous to his followers and capable of committed, “steadfast” relationships. Meanwhile, while Beowulf's piety is not discussed – he is a heathen, after all – he *is* blessed. God, who knew “the long times and troubles” the Danes had experienced (15), had sent Beowulf as “a comfort sent...to that nation” (13-4). While Scyld, when he dies, is accepted into the “Lord's keeping” (28), is not sent by “the Lord of Life, / the glorious Almighty” (16-7). Additionally, Beowulf is not just blessed by the Christian God. He is not even just the “famous son” known throughout the nation, he is also “renowned” (17) and “well-regarded” (54). Beowulf, then, is distinguishable from Scyld as a successful leader in his own right; indeed, when considering only the first twenty-five lines, Beowulf is much more highly regarded and, at least in Augustinian ideology, more heroic than Scyld. The poet gives the audience, then, multiple approaches to leadership in the first sixty lines alone.

The Ultimate Hero

Beowulf has many more role models than just Scyld or Hrothgar. He must be strong and powerful in battle, but he must also be wise, generous, and prudent. The way he chooses to use these skills identifies him as the unique hero he becomes, but he is not purely following the example set by Scyld, as some have suggested. Rather, he paves his own way, exemplifying both Augustinian traits (wisdom, prudence, compassion) and Germanic values (fortitude, fidelity). As Arthur Brodeur writes in *The Art of Beowulf*, “the heroic ideals of Germanic paganism and of Anglo-Saxon Christendom have been reconciled and fused, so that [Beowulf] exemplifies the best of both” (183). As Beowulf boasts in the hall of Heorot, he means to “prove [himself] with a

proud deed,” to perform heroically (637); this he does, thus following in the footsteps of the leaders before him, while retaining a unique heroic identity.

REDEEMING HEROES IN *BEOWULF: THE GAME*

Previous chapters have set a foundation for the ideological nature and treatment of leadership in the medieval *Beowulf*. Leaders are battle-savvy, but also compassionate, generous, and wise. Leaders, the medieval *Beowulf* seems to claim, can be successful in various ways, and they use their skill set with prudence and consideration for their followers. In his 2007 Hollywood adaptation, Robert Zemeckis presents a set of leaders who are greedy, lustful, and bound to fall into a pattern of disappointment. Viola Miglio writes in her facetious article, "Drinking and Debauchery: Fifty Ways to Leave Your *Beowulf* (Butchered)," that "Zemeckis' *Beowulf*'s message entails that chopping enemies to bits is fine (plenty of gore and splatter confirms it), but sex and carnal desire (and their excesses as embodied by lust) are the root of all evils" (2). In "'What we Need is a Hero': *Beowulf* in a Post-9/11 World," Alison Gulley notes, accurately, that what might be most strange in Zemeckis' *Beowulf* "may very well be that good king Hrothgar the wise ruler and loyal family man of the alleged source text has become a bloated, inebriated, belching, wench-chasing (and in the opening scene also grotesquely naked) lout" (Gulley 801). The Hrothgar of the film, like all of the men portrayed, lack most, maybe even all, of the traits that the medieval *Beowulf* instills in its heroes. Augustinian heroism holds no place in Zemeckis' world of anti-heroes.

Though it is based on the film, *Beowulf: The Game* seems to reject this pessimistic, purely anti-virtue (though also anti-vice) perspective. Unlike the medieval text, even unlike the film it is adapted from, the video game presents Hrothgar as not only an actor in the story, but also as the narrator. Perhaps unwittingly, Ubisoft replicates the reliable narrator of the poem, while also presenting him as a flawed character within the story. Additionally, they give this narrator the same name as one of the main actors – Hrothgar. In doing so, they return Hrothgar's

dignity, his respect, and add even more flexibility to the nature of his character. The video game manipulates the narrative of the film, and unwittingly returns to many of the ideals of the medieval *Beowulf*, yet remains culturally relevant and of-the-moment. What it lacks in its qualities as a video game, it in some ways redeems as a narrative. The video game makes three narratological decisions that lead to a partial return to Augustinian-heroism – in addition to placing Hrothgar as narrator, the genre's addition of a character-gamer act to celebrate wisdom and compassion while also challenging the pride/lust narrative of the film.

The Character-Gamer

In the study of video games and narrative, one of the most foundational, and yet most challenging, aspects of scholarship is the defining of the game player's role in relation to its characters. Mieke Bal defines a character as "the effect that occurs when a figure is presented with distinctive, mostly human characteristics" (112). But what happens when that character is, in a sense, you? Bal notes that "character-effects" occur "when resemblance between human beings and fabricated figures is so great that we forget the fundamental difference: we...identify with the character, [we] cry, [we] laugh, and [we] search for or with it, or even against it, when the character is a villain" (113). An avid reader may feel this when they are so invested in a book that hours later, glancing up, they remember that they are reading a book; a movie may immerse a viewer so that they yell at the protagonist in the horror film who decides to investigate the worrying noise coming from behind the door, or up the stairs.

But character-effect plays out differently in a video game. In essence, it is the same as a reader and a viewer. We yell at our characters when they are inept (even if it was our own ineptitude), we grow frustrated and cry out when a villain defeats us, we grow attached to certain characters (choosing Mario over Luigi, or creating a character in an open-world like *Skyrim*).

Character-effect, then, is not just present in a video game – it is *necessary*. When, in *Skyrim*, we choose to be a wood-elf with purple skin, and name it, give it qualities, and present it to the world a certain way, we then become it. Character and gamer merge, enunciating character-effect, and becoming what I term a "character-gamer." This character-gamer interacts with the game-world, the characters, actors, and, ultimately, the narrative, in a way that is unique from the book or film experience. The video game experience of the character-gamer doesn't create a new emotion – indeed, character-effect shows that we identify with the protagonist in a book or film differently than with other characters – but what the experience *does* do that these other texts haven't (yet), is allow us to experience it more viscerally. The character-gamer controls the story in a way the other actors do not, and can even result in changing (or making) the narrative. Thus, the character-gamer is simultaneously a character-narrator (CN), an actor, *and* the reader/viewer/player. This character-gamer creation in *Beowulf: The Game* allows for movement in a world that has been, originally, slated as fate, and by Zemeckis, as inescapably sinful. Where the film claims that the title of king, leader, or hero is synonymous with pride and lust, the video game gives the character-gamer the choice to become what they choose.

In *Beowulf: The Game*, the gamer plays Beowulf, a character who must choose whether to lead with heroic wisdom or with brutal (negative) strength. This particular character-gamer, the Beowulf-gamer, is presented with two options: build a legacy as a hero, or be remembered as a monster slayer (or, in Hrothgar's words, "accursed"). The narrator warns the character-gamer that "In the end, all men die...But while you LIVE, HERO, your legacy is YOURS to build, as a man, a Monster Slayer, and as a King!" (Ubisoft). The genre's unique character-gamer allows the gamer to return to the wisdom-driven world of the medieval text, but it also emphasizes the importance of compassion and relationships. Not only does the gamer develop a relationship

with the character, merging into a character-gamer, they also must consider the relationships that develop throughout the game's narrative, weighing their importance and choosing how to act on them. In *Heorot*, for example, the character-gamer sits on the throne between two characters – Wiglaf, who advises the Heroism skills, and Unferth, who advises Beowulf on the Carnal Fury skills. The character-gamer must choose carefully in their selection of skills from these characters, and their decisions shape whether they become known as the Hero King or the Monster Slayer. Additionally, the decision between Carnal Fury and Heroism affect the thanes in the character-gamer's company. Carnal Fury, a skill bestowed by Grendel's Mother, is a "blind rage" that can "save your life at other's expense" (Ubisoft).¹⁶ When unlocked, the game is clear in the costly effects of the skill. The band of thanes can be hurt by Carnal Fury, and if all thanes are killed, then the character-gamer loses and must restart the mission. This not only makes battle strategy a must, it also emphasizes the importance of a relationship with Beowulf's warriors.

The Hrothgar-Narrator

Zemeckis' *Beowulf*, as pointed out earlier, paints Hrothgar as a fool, anything but wise. Viola Miglio succinctly deems Zemeckis' Hrothgar "fat, half-naked, drunken [and] lecherous old fool" (2.1). However, in the medieval text, Hrothgar is always shown in a "dignified light" – many scholars note that even Hrothgar's grief in the original poem is heroic. Levin Schücking notes that King Hrothgar is "a prince of peace, full of fatherly benevolence, caring for the welfare of his people" (41). And, though Raymond P. Tripp mentions that Hrothgar is "peculiarly passive in acquiring his fame", he ultimately argues that "the *Beowulf* poet has only good to say about Hrothgar", and "[w]ithin the context of the poem, hall and builder [Hrothgar]

¹⁶ Image of the Carnal Fury screenshot.

are offered as emblems of an ancient excellence” (127). The video game, modeled on the Hollywood film, retains the mood of failure in Hrothgar's character, but it rejects the vision of the "fat, half-naked, drunken [and] lecherous old fool," instead presenting a sober, clothed, and regal king. When Beowulf stands upon the road of the Danes, he claims that Hrothgar should not “be shame[d] to accept [his] aide,” and Wiglaf repeats this sentiment, saying “it is no shame to be accursed by demons” (Ubisoft).

These actions return the story to a more respect-driven narrative, but what really defines the text's embrace of Augustinian values is by placing Hrothgar as a narrator. As *The Wanderer* reminds its readers, "no man grows wise without he have / his share of winters" (64-5), and as narrator of the game, Hrothgar acts as the elderly mentor who has learned his lesson and is now guiding Beowulf into an ethical mode of leadership. Like the medieval text, which offers a narrator who is truly omniscient, both separate from and completely aware of all events that take place in the narrative, the video game gives Hrothgar these powers of omniscient story-teller. However, the video game also chooses to make the narrator the character in a way that the medieval text and film do not. While the film employs a non-perceptible external narrator (EN[np]), the medieval text utilizes a perceptible EN (EN[p]), a narrator who identifies as an "I" but who has no visible actor in the narrative, and the video game narrator is a character-bound narrator (CN), a narrator who is also an actor in the fabula (Bal 21, 27). Hrothgar in *Beowulf: The Game* plays an active role in his narration, and thus he is perceptible (a CN[p]).

While in the film the first scene we see is one of Heorot and Hrothgar's drunken shenanigans, the video game presents sea monsters swimming under water as Hrothgar narrates. He begins: “I, Hrothgar, Master of Battles, King of the Danes...I have a story for you!” As the camera pans up, we catch our first sight of Beowulf, and a group of men chanting his name. Over

the chanting Hrothgar once again names himself: “I, Hrothgar, the fearless, Hrothgar, the monster-slayer, Hrothgar the...ACCURSED!” And then Hrothgar turns it over to the character-gamer, telling them that “It is your turn to test your mettle, and face the consequences of your acts!” It is here that the story begins, and the character-gamer begins to “hone those hero skills.”

As a CN(p), his position as omniscient God-like narrator and his actions as a character-actor put him in the role of the wise-but-flawed mentor, the anti-hero role model. As omniscient narrator, Hrothgar is elevated among men, and his words caution the gamer (and Beowulf) to think of his actions. When Hrothgar has become a successful king in the medieval text, his

mind turned

to hall-building: he handed down orders

for men to work on a great mead-hall

meant to be a wonder of the world forever.” (67-70)

And the generous Hrothgar means to “dispense / his God-given goods to young and old” (71-2).

Thus, his generosity can be seen as go[o]dliness, a man high above others in a time of glory, building a kingdom for his “young followers” who “flocked” to him (65-6). He, in other words, has become associated with the goodness of God. In “Setting and Ethos: The Pattern of Measure and Limit in ‘Beowulf,’” Daniel G. Calder suggests that in the creation of Heorot, “Hrothgar acts nearly *like a god* as he orders the hall erected” (22, my emphasis). The “parallelism” between the scop’s song of God’s creation of the world “is too strong to be insignificant,” claims Calder, and he notes that “Heorot is identified, even indirectly, with the right of God” (23).

In the video game, however, the emphasis is taken away from Heorot, and placed instead on the glory of heroism, and, ultimately, leadership. And Hrothgar is the voice of power and goodness, acting against the Satan-like figure of Grendel's mother. While she insists that

Beowulf should “use” the dangerous carnal fury, Hrothgar warns that these actions have consequences. Indeed, just as the Christian God asks his followers to follow the ten commandments, Hrothgar seems to value certain commandments as well, though they are more the commandments of what the game *considers* medieval leadership – Hrothgar warns against killing without conscience, but also against neglecting to protect the kingdom and its glory and providing followers with rewards for their loyalty. While the *Beowulf* poet elevates Hrothgar via the building of Heorot as a creation metaphor, the video game elevates Hrothgar by raising him as a stand-in for God – as narrator, he is omniscient and acts as a framework for the ideology of the game. This is even clearer when returning to the powers that the game forces the gamer to choose between – Carnal Fury, the easier, sinful action, is championed by Grendel’s mother as she constantly calls “use it”. Meanwhile, Hrothgar reminds the gamer that they will have to “face the consequences” of their acts, thereby creating a natural connection between him and Heroic Storm. Both of these are clearly good and evil, and call even more attention to Hrothgar’s status as “God” of the video game.

Additionally, by beginning with Hrothgar as the narrator warning the character-gamer of the consequences of his actions, Ubisoft makes an unwittingly skewed parallel to the medieval text. Consider the opening of the medieval *Beowulf*, where the life of Scyld is narrated.

So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by
and the kings who rules them had courage and greatness.
We have heard of those princes’ heroic campaigns.
There was Shield Sheafson, scourge of many tribes
[...]
That was one good king.” (20).

Scholars have noted that by beginning the narrative with Scyld's life, the poet sets an example for Beowulf to follow. In the video game, Hrothgar, like Scyld, is the first voice we hear, and his actions set an example for Beowulf – he is “Hrothgar the fearless”. Because he is also “Hrothgar the ACCURSED”, his role as narrator gives him the function of “anti-role-model”, he has made mistakes, and his actions act as a warning for Beowulf. Though the intended audience likely won't notice the skewed parallel here, Hrothgar's replacement of Scyld indicates both his importance and his wisdom. And wisdom is something that is vital in the original text – he is often referred to as “the wise one”. Even his tears, something of contention due to a fragmented manuscript, can be viewed as an act of wisdom, as Thomas L. Wright argues in his article “Hrothgar's Tears”. This is in stark contrast to the Hrothgar of the film, who clearly learns little before he jumps to his death in order to make way for Beowulf.

CONCLUSION: THE EPILOGUE

Jonathan Stubbs has said that the Middle Ages has been used by Hollywood for a long time to “articulate contemporary political ideas and anxieties” (398). Alison Gulley, in her article “‘What We Need is a Hero’: *Beowulf* in a Post-9/11 World,” aptly responds, and notes that “*Beowulf* stands as a particularly appropriate work for this purpose. At heart, the text lends itself to revision and reinterpretation. From its humble beginnings, *Beowulf* has been a work on the margins between paganism and Christianity, Anglo-Saxon tribalism and English state identity, Germanic heroism and Christian humility” (Gulley 803). Zemeckis’ *Beowulf* attempts to use this, and almost completely recreates the story, concocting a new ideological approach in which heroes must be inherently flawed and incapable of redemption (and therefore not actually heroes). The video game also utilizes the adaptability of *Beowulf*, but the ideological approach becomes dichotomous where the film is monotonous – heroism and goodness, the game implies, must be hard-fought and difficult to achieve. It is easy to be bad, it continues, but, as they warn you, be prepared “to pay the price” (Ubisoft). In creating an ideological structure that rewards the patient, heroic character, the game (perhaps unwittingly) returns to a structure of heroism that is much more Augustinian in its call for strategy, prudence, wisdom, and compassion. However, in simplifying the poem’s complex ideological morals to good/bad, difficult/easy, the game acts as a palimpsest, obscuring the original goals of the poem and contemporizing the medieval story.

The Pre-Epilogue: Beginnings and Endings

When Hrothgar says that the character-gamer must “face the consequences,” he sets the tone for the rest of the game, where the *Beowulf*-gamer must choose between two actions, or buttons on the controller – Heroism, a power that increases the strength of all thanes, or Carnal Fury, a power that makes *Beowulf* invincible but makes it possible for him to kill his own men.

The game is set to make it tempting to use this Carnal Fury. While Carnal Fury is positioned on one of the most easily accessible buttons on an XBOX or PS3 controller, the right trigger, the gamer must hit two buttons (in the correct order) in order to access Heroism. Because Heroism is accessible via two buttons, it doesn't even show up in the gameplay setup. In addition, during battle, the controller will shake when carnal fury is available, and the voice of Grendel's mother sensually calls for Beowulf to "use it." In other words, while Carnal Fury is easy to access, the more positive Heroism lacks any "easy" incentive.

However, while Carnal Fury is an easy tactic, and one that often results in success, Hrothgar consistently warns Beowulf of the cost of his actions. "The path to glory is brutal," he warns the character-gamer, and "in the end, all men die, Beowulf. But while you LIVE, HERO, your legacy is YOURS to build; as a man, as a Monster Slayer, and as a King!" (Ubisoft). The choice is left up to the character-gamer, but the video game tries to influence them, encouraging the more difficult route. Thus, though Carnal Fury might make the objective easier, a gamer may spend hours attempting to complete the level without using Carnal Fury, and may even become upset if Carnal Fury becomes a requirement. In *The Medium of the Video Game*, Mark J.P. Wolf writes that "a certain manner of thinking and reacting is encouraged, sometimes at the reflex level" (14). This reflex-level thinking provides an opportunity for the world of the video game to program a gamer's ideological patterns. The character-gamer becomes part of the narrative's ideology, influencing the gamer to, within the world of the game, believe in a certain pattern of thought; in *Beowulf: The Game*, the ideological pattern is one of always choosing good, no matter the cost.

Unlike the medieval *Beowulf*, even unlike the film it is adapted from, *Beowulf: The Game* has two potential endings. The endings arise from the dichotomous world of good and bad, of

heroic and carnal. The options, neither of which necessarily call to mind the ending of the medieval text or the film, supply

one of the game's only direct references to lines from the original poem, a paraphrase of 'Let whoever can / win glory before death. When a warrior is gone, / that will be his best and only bulwark (wryce se þe mōte / dōmes ær dēaþe; þæt bið drihtguman / unlifgendum æfter sēlest)' (1387a-89) (Barrington and English 36).

In the first ending, which a character-gamer will achieve if they have played the game with the "good" option of the heroic, they see the title "Epilogue: The Hero King." The camera pans towards Wealhtheow, the mournful widow, looking down at the ground and murmuring that "His song shall be sung forever / As long as the world turns, / his tale should be told" (Ubisoft). The boat is set adrift, the white sail billowing forward, and golden treasure littering the deck. A chorus mournfully swells majestically, reminiscent of the music in a cathedral, and fire is spilled from a natural stone archway onto the funeral boat. As it drifts towards the open sea, Wiglaf speaks a heartfelt eulogy: "He was the best of us all, / the shepherd of our land, / he gave his life to save his people. / O Prince of Warriors and King of Kings; Beowulf, my friend, your legacy will never die!" (Ubisoft). The camera pans towards the open sea, where the sun is breaking through the clouds; panning further left, Heorot lies on a cliff, its flags flying with grandeur and pride. The chorus swells even more majestically, as Wiglaf walks away. The completion panel comes up, declaring, "You leave your legacy as a...Hero King." The game statistics (of heroic skills and kills) are displayed, and the game ends.

Meanwhile, if the character-gamer's legacy is the Monster-Slayer, then the epilogue begins with Wealhtheow looking on in silence, staring almost defiantly at the funeral boat, its

dark, black sails (not white) lit up by the flash of lightning. Instead of glowing, golden treasure, the boat is filled with shabby, dingy, and empty pots, a single sword, and, much more noticeably, the bed on which Beowulf lies. There is no chorus; instead, a storm rages as drums beat solemnly. The drums get louder, more ferocious, until the fire spills onto the boat from above, setting it aflame as it sails towards the open sea. A swell of loud, menacing humming seems to swell, somewhat like the chorus of the "Hero King", but with seemingly less significance and much more grim. Screams and painful moans start to break through the sound of the drums, and the boat slides past the arch. The camera pans towards Wiglaf, standing in silence. Like in the "Hero King", he gives a eulogy, but it lacks any friendliness or hope. Somberly, almost grimly, he declares, "He knew fear / and filled the hearts of his enemies with dread. / O Mightiest of Monster Slayers! / The world shall never forget your feats!" The tone of his voice is much more somber, and it's clear why, as the funeral boat sails towards the cliff, where Heorot is in flames.

Intriguingly, the game refuses to celebrate the Monster Slayer. While the Hero King receives a summary of their statistics, the Monster Slayer's ending proceeds straight to the credits. The game submits to the hero-villain categorization; the Hero King receives pomp and circumstance, celebration, and their legacy "will never die" (Ubisoft). In direct opposition to Wiglaf's claim that "The world shall never forget" the Beowulf-gamer's feats, the statistics from the game are lost, left out of sight from the gamer. Even when the narrative has ended and the game has wrapped up, the text is maintaining its ideological platform, reminding its gamer that Hero Kings are celebrated, while Monster Slayers are merely "never" forgotten.

The video game, as a game, may be bad. And as a narrative, it isn't "better" than the medieval text (though it's arguably infinitely better than the film's story). However, the video game accomplishes a relatively impressive feat in recreating a narrative that has lost much of its

respectability and complexity in other many adaptations. *Beowulf: The Game* gives Beowulf a shot at redemption (from Hollywood). And, while it simplifies a beautifully complex story of wisdom, of death, and of compassion, it also manages to contemporize Beowulfian leadership, highlighting the blend of Augustinian and Germanic values at play in the medieval text. As video game Hrothgar reminds us, "the path to glory is brutal" (Ubisoft). Leadership is not easy. It isn't a matter of replication. Medievalism follows these same tenants. Medievalism is not replication. It is OURS to (re)build.

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APPENDIX

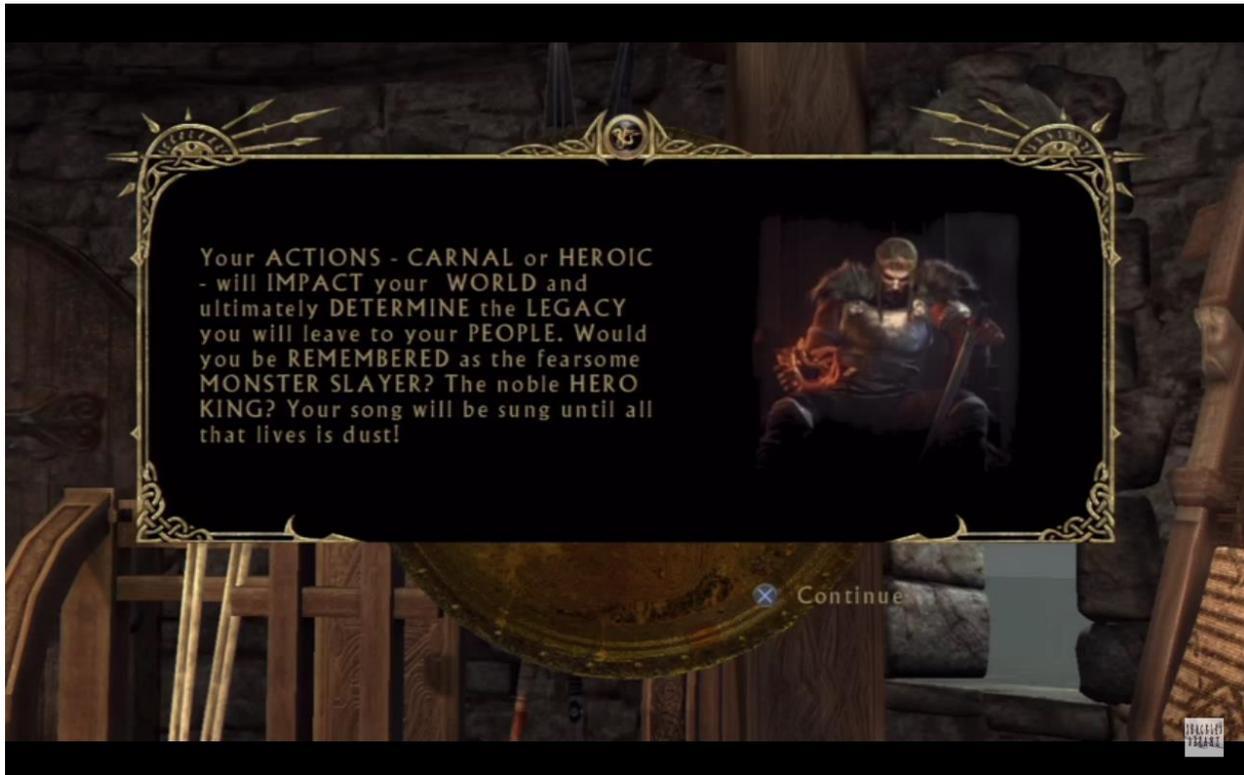


Fig. A1. Legacy system screen



Fig. A2. New Carnal Fury skill

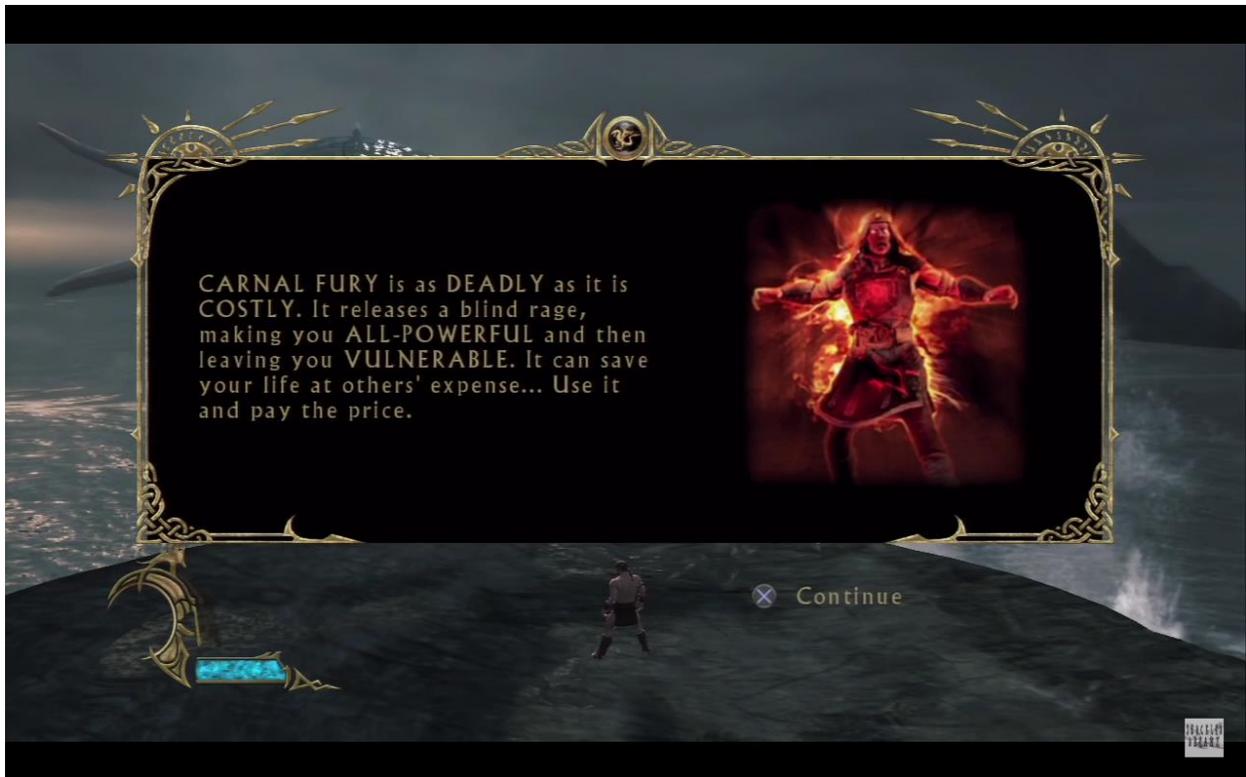


Fig. A3. Carnal Fury screen (1)



Fig. A4. Carnal Fury screen (2)



Fig. A5. Carnal Fury screen (3)



Fig. A6. Carnal Fury screen (4)



Fig. A7. New Heroism skill

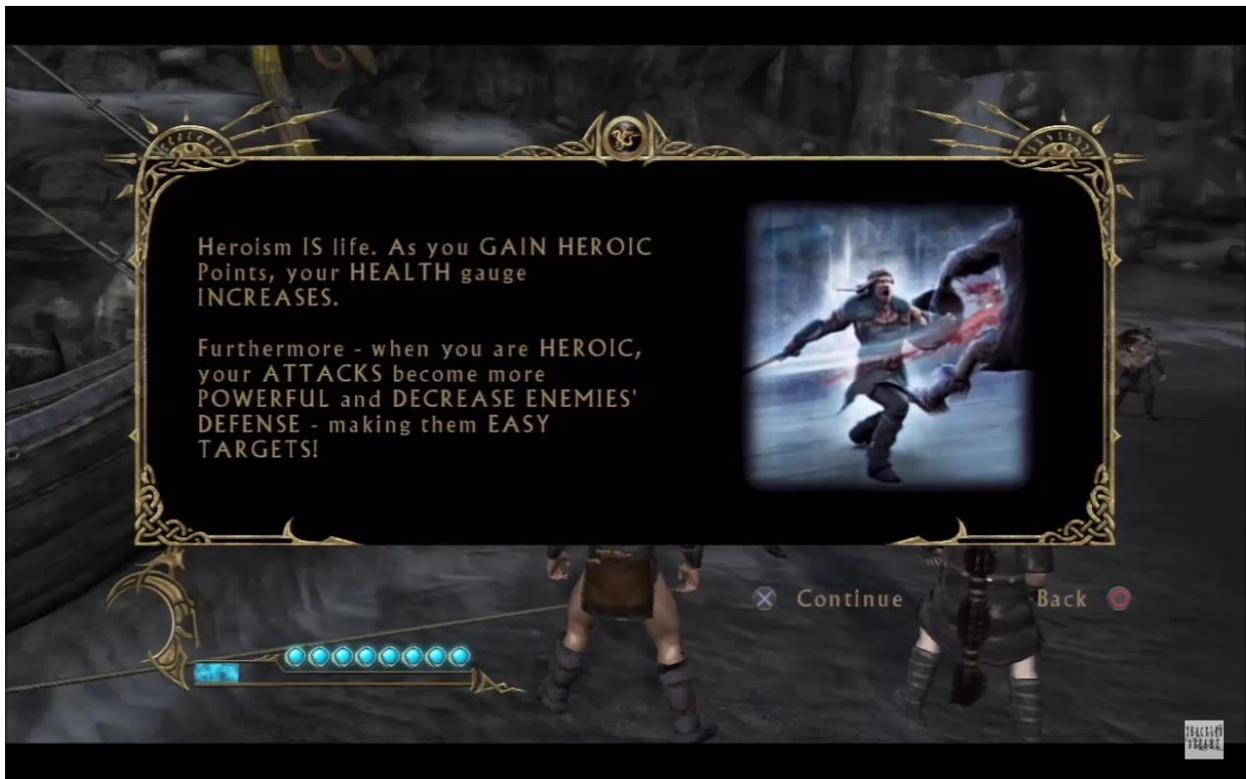


Fig. A8. Heroism screen (1)

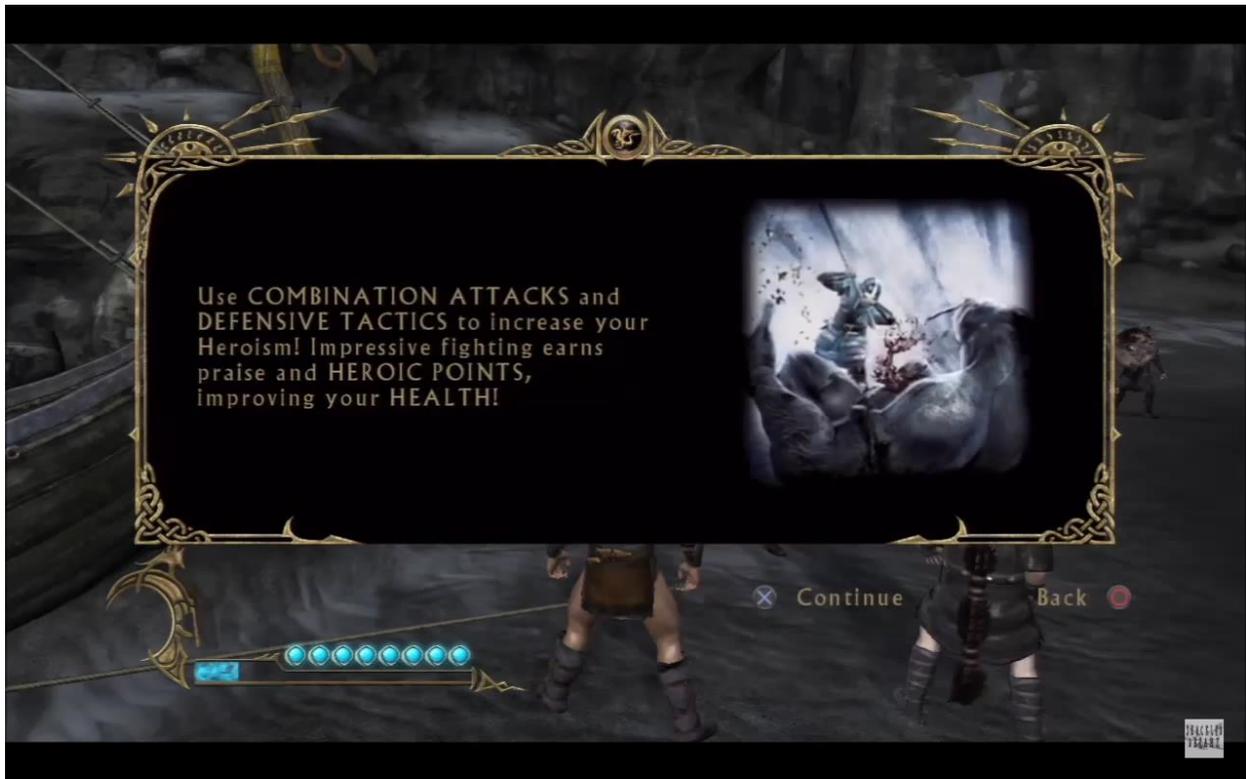


Fig. A9. Heroism screen (2)