*Dangerous Agencies: Norns, Games and Aesthetics of Emergence.*

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| Þaðan koma meyjar  margs vitandi  þrjár ór þeim sæ,  er und þolli stendr;  Urð hétu eina,  aðra Verðandi,  - skáru á skíði, -  Skuld ina þriðju;  þær lög lögðu,  þær líf kuru  alda börnum,  örlög seggja. | 20. Thence come the maidens  mighty in wisdom,  Three from the dwelling  down 'neath the tree;  Urth is one named,  Verthandi the next,--  [On the wood they scored](https://mailspace.falmouth.ac.uk/owa/redir.aspx?C=mCWpQPjy0E6o_7D1PjvNIeC2lIZCH9MIvNVbZbQK9U6dhS1VkKTrEVtWojVdNTC-reO6bBObEBc.&URL=https%3a%2f%2fen.wikipedia.org%2fwiki%2fRunes),--  and Skuld the third.  Laws they made there,  and life allotted  To the sons of men,  and set their fates. |

Extract from Poetic Edda, *Völuspá*

Among many other commentators on gender, Hélène Cixous (1989) has convincingly argued that femininity is aligned with and defined by passivity, evidenced through social roles and cultural representations. Masculinity is therefore placed on the side of activity and aligned with the power to act on the world. These are, of course, abstractions of lived gender. In the real practice of our everyday lives, power is not simply the preserve of masculinity, instead it is enacted in many different messy ways by both men and women. Nonetheless the abstractions still hold, affecting the way we regard ourselves through the lens of gender.

Seeking ways for disturbing simplified gender alignments, my art work sets out to articulate a more complex take on gender and power. Motherhood is certainly one clear form of power, one that causes all kinds of trouble – perhaps the original trouble. Instead, my current work concentrates on power of a rather different kind. What I am interested in is Fate. In particular, the way in which Fate is embodied by the Norns of Norse of Mythology: the three women who appear to preside over the destiny of ‘men’. I propose that The Norns provide our own culture with a way of thinking about our own ability to make choices in a world full of contingency. As such, I’m calling on the figures of the Norns in my painting (and here in my writing) as a means of drawing into question how we think about our agency and power to act on our world. I’m calling onto the field of play those big metaphysical and existential questions that are so often marginalised within the seductive immediacy of consumer culture. As such, it should be borne in mind that my repurposing of the Norse Norns is always an imaginative and hermeneutic engagement rather than a literary or historical one. I am putting us in danger – a necessary danger – of calling time on the ‘hero’ narrative that we often have about ourselves to remind us how alienated and subjugated we all are.

Sometimes represented as witches, as with *Macbeth*’s semi-comedic weird sisters, or as prophets or harbingers, sometimes as gods, the Norns are diversely represented. In the existing Norse Sagas and Eddas, they are figured as eternal and supernatural. They are however indisputably women (even if in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* they cause Banquo confusion about their being and gender [Act I, Sc iii]). While they might have an allegorical dimension, they are certainly, embodied as women, sometimes of three distinctive ages, as is the case in the recent film of *Macbeth* (dir. Justin Kurzel, 2016). In whatever guise taken, the Norns are undoubtedly ‘dangerous’ women because they can be said to stand testimony to the folly of men’s inflated sense of agency. As evidenced within the verses of the Edda cited above, they make the laws that govern the life of men ‘Laws they made there, and life allocated to the sons of men, and set their fates’ (*Völuspá*). In another text we hear from hero Svipdag that, ‘No man can deny Urd’ (The Ballad of Svipdag published in Crossley-Holland, 1980: 125). Of the three Norns, Urd embodies the principle of Fate, Skuld represents Being, Verdrandi Necessity. Unlike Shakespeare’s weird sisters, and apart from these three allegorical designations, in Norse myth the Norns are also guardians who care for the tree ‘that suffers, that cares for all living creatures and ensures continuity’ (Crossley-Holland, xxiii). Power is therefore theirs in many different ways.

Within these various configurations, the Norns are often imagined as weavers of fate and circumstance, shaping thereby the narrative of human lives; certainly this is the role of the Greek fates. In Norse myth they might not be quite so hands-on, instead standing as representatives of the factors that determine the course of lives. In whatever guise, they necessarily raise the issue of ‘free will’, a principle so central to more modern thought and culture. By contrast, free will is not a concept with purchase in Viking culture. It is this historical and cultural difference that so draws me in and that brings mythologies’ relevance to our own age. For me, the Norns deftly represent the push-pull of agency against determination as manifest in contemporary culture and discourse. Fate, necessity and being - these powerful and fundamental principles are embodied in female form. They are not deities, nor goddesses. They cannot be appealed or sacrificed to, making them more dangerous and unresponsive to the will of men, yet they bring to the stage the very nature of the human condition and make present the occult nature of the complex and largely unseen web that circumscribes our lives and choices. There is then a subtle and dangerously destabilizing configuration of power to be gathered here and, critically (fatefully), one that actively undermines Vitruvian notions of men’s earthly dominion.

I imagine that the Norns preside ambiguously over what we might call, using game development parlance, the ‘decision tree’ of our lives, therein bearing witness to its inherently contingency on othered, multitudinous, tidal forces. In this reading, the Norns are not causal agents, but instead connected to dimensions and flows invisible to the human eye. Here we return to the language of Celtic and Viking culture. According to Brian Bates (2013), ‘wyrd’ refers to the vast and complex web of intertidal connections that can be read but never altered by a shaman. The Anglo-Saxon term ‘wyrd’ is synonymous with Uror in Norse, Uror the anglicized version of Urd (our first Norn). In *Beowulf*, wyrd is translated by most interpreters as fate (‘Gæð a wyrd swa hio scel!’, ‘Fate goes wherever she shall’), yet it implies the inseparability of being, circumstance and fate – rather than simply predestination, as we might read the term now. Some element of choice, of agency, is core to being human and yet we are rarely our own master; a notion and experience that feels for many threatening and existentially belittling. Norns then have the capacity to be read in ways that reflect our own contemporary dilemmas, emblemizing rather beautifully the push-pull between agency (the ability to act in and on the world in terms of free will and choice) and determination (resulting from the constraints that bind our choices and ability to act in and on the world).

Games are often designed to allow players a temporary respite from diminished mastery in everyday life (much as Freud argues for popular fiction). The sense of power that games can afford to players (the ability to act effectively in the game world and be more dominant than other players) is, as evident currently on certain internet fora, coincident with the notion that masculinity is synonymous with power. That definition of gender is seen as under threat by more nuanced practices.

Digital games can be described as forms of learning curves that hook players into various powerful feedback loops, where ‘cause’ is seemingly granted to players to produce spectacular ‘effect’. This produces a strong (if illusionary) sense of power and agency within the context of the game. Games therefore provide players with a sense of agency and mastery in terms of actions taken or in terms of displaying skill, determination (as in dogged pursuit of a goal) and dexterity. In horror and action games for example, disruption (let’s say a zombie apocalypse) is often contained by a player’s action giving them a sense of being a hero. Few games undermine this as it provides a proven recipe for financial success. Small wonder then that alternative approaches lead some of the noisier net-based commentators to fear the loss of this power in what they regard as a ‘feminisation’, rather than diversification, of gaming pleasure.

Games can take many forms and some work outside of and sometimes counter to the normative rhetorics of mastery and skill, competition and agency (*The Stanley Parable* for example). Games are far more frequently sold on an ability to make a player feel powerful; something that appeals in a world and culture that requires so much conformity. When conventional figurations of player agency are challenged by game designers with a ‘diversity agenda’, it would seem that a certain form of witchery is taking place to some commentators: dangerous women these game designers – these Norns, these feminist witch women, conceived as ruining the pleasures of male ‘real’ gamers who fear changes to normative figurative representation and guiltless gaming masteries. Dangerous women are then those that threaten the status-quo; who give lie to the narrow alignment of power and gender that Hélène Cixous identified.

The Norns allow an understanding of the vicissitudes of power that interleaves with my interest in the pleasures offered by games (as offering stable, rule-based choices). Games have been at the centre of my academic and creative work over the past 30 years. I’ve sought to understand the relation of games and their formal features to the metaphysical and mythological, as well as being alert to the types of power they offer to players. This includes the ways in which games play dice with agency, a ‘Nornic’ dimension often overlooked by rhetorics of mastery.

Many games, digital or not, have elements of chance built into them. In digital games this is often quite hidden, as opposed to dice throws in a board game or in the many possible permutations of card games. The connection between the throw of the dice and luck/fate is a long one that has existential and metaphysical reverberations. Luke Rhinehart’s novel *The Dice Man* (1971) sees the main character throwing dice to make decisions. This novel invokes the ambiguity of the Norns in relation to existential matters through its focus on choice and randomization. The protagonist seems to abnegate responsibility for his choices, yet the intention behind this *choice* to use dice is more accurately an attempt to appropriate god’s power to play dice with the universe. It all comes down to garnering a sense of agency to face-off against existential panic. The role of chance in games then seems to have a special relationship with this crisis.

Through my art practice I have been experimenting with ways to reveal and bring to witness these Norn figures that I’m claiming carry such a potently disruptive myth for our age. It is therefore the ambiguous relationship between of agency and determination that I am engaged with in an attempt to show the knottiness of their relationship. In trying to find ways of bringing the Norns to life through painting, I was faced with a dilemma. Painting feels oddly concrete when it comes to the figurative. An image seems to have more solidity and clearer meaning than words, which are always virtual and indirect. Words float and slide, while images of bodies seem weighed down with judgement and physicality. Paint a female figure and it is subject to regimes of beauty and judgement of the surface.

Through a workshop run by artist Kate Walters (www.katewalters.co.uk), I was introduced to a method that sought to bypass express intention and which provided access to a more fluid and emergent process. Working with watercolour and a reductive process, alongside a meditative approach, allows images to emerge and new affordances to manifest. The emphasis of my Norns paintings then is on my attention to what is happening, rather than a planned image-making exercise. This opens out space for the unexpected and for that which comes from the place of the Other. This seemed the most suitable technique to give figuration to those indeterminant yet embodied Norns with their ambiguous relation to Fate. I was endlessly surprised during the process: figures took shape out of the swirl of water and pigment. The making process itself therefore carried something dangerous, an experience of letting go and allowing the determining forces of the materials and process take over. In contrast to the clockmaker approach necessary within game development, where even the random is planned, painting allows for a practice grounded in emergence and which can embrace indeterminacy for aesthetic means. As Diane Purkiss writes of the Norns in *Macbeth*, ‘The witch-figure can stand for nothing concrete, but must evoke the disorder of the play’s notion of order by indeterminacy.’ (1996,211).

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**Biography**

Tanya Krzywinska is a Professor in Digital Games at Falmouth University and an artist. She is the author of several books and many articles on different aspects of digital games, including most recently exploring remediations of the Gothic in games. She is currently working on a monograph, entitled Gothic Games.