

God of War
World Building, Narrative, and Player Experience

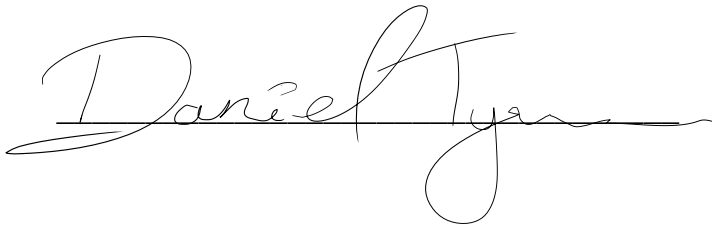
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Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) (programme name). It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Daniel Ryan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

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Abstract

How *God of War* (2018) creates an emotional and engaging experience through narrative and world building. I will explore both of these aspects in detail in regard to game design and how this impacts the player experience and how that, in turn, creates a unique experience in *God of War*. After playing through this game twice myself, I began to notice how it was distinctly different to any other game I had played before, the entire playable experience felt different to me as the audience to the game. This is when I began to delve deeper into why this may be.

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Introduction

To understand a sense of immersion and attachment as an audience or “Player” to video games, we must first explore games and their place in our world as well as what makes a good video game. Frans Mayra in, *An Introduction to Game Studies* provides an excellent overview of the most basic elements of Game Studies and also into the place of video games as part of our culture today – resulting in an understanding of the basic elements of games that will create an immersive experience. To allow context for the role of video games in our modern day lives, Mayra states that while in the past games were “only cluttering the children’s rooms and arcade parlours”¹ they are now “conquering living rooms and stepping out from the computer screen to various multifunctional devices”², showing a true shift in the place video games now have in our lives – they are a far more adult experience to the general public now than they would have been. This has allowed for a rapid change in both the quality and software of video games but also changes in progression of stories and therefore progression of the worlds that hold them. As Mayra further discusses the space video games occupy in our lives, it becomes apparent that the audience (or the “player”) have molded and shaped the types of games and stories that have been played and written through demand and this in turn will influence how attached these players are to each individual game and story.

As games and stories develop so does the complexity of the worlds in which the players inhabit during play. Each player approaches a game in a unique fashion that will change both ideas and attitudes towards certain games.

¹ Mayra, Frans. *An Introduction to Game Studies*, SAGE Publications, 2008. P 15.

² Mayra, Frans. *An Introduction to Game Studies*, SAGE Publications, 2008. P 15.

Each different approach in mindset seems to result in the player either engaging with a certain type of video game or not. This is vitally important to consider as this can create a discourse in what is considered a “good” game to play. Engagement hangs on approach, and while Mayra concludes that *“some gamers concentrate more on the rule system and play the game to win or finish it, without much regard for the game world or its backstory”*³ it is becoming apparent that this is becoming a harder state to remain in as the increasingly complex worlds and stories players are partaking in forces the player to consider the game world through rules and both linear and non-linear storylines.

To begin to explore the immersion a player feels whilst participating in the “play” of a video game one must first look to the foundation of what captures an audience’s attention in entertainment in general. For thousands of years’ story has been what drives and captures audiences. However, we must look to what is integral to these stories and how they are supported in their existence. Mark J. P. Wolf notes that “it is the world that supports all the narratives set in it and that is constantly present during the audience’s experience”⁴. Despite if the audience, or in this case “player”, is aware of it or not; the existence of worlds that our stories inhabit gives them meaning, purpose and a place that we can use to further understand the story that is being told. In the exploration of immersion, it is apparent that the core idea that “worlds, unlike stories, need not rely on narrative structures, though

³ Mayra, Frans. *An Introduction to Game Studies*, SAGE Publications, 2008. P 18.

⁴ Wolf, Mark J. P. *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Sub creation*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2012. P 16-17.

stories are always dependent on the worlds in which they take place”⁵. For in order to “invite an audience to vicariously enter another world and hold them there”⁶ there must be a world for them to enter, then once that world is created and understood a story has a solid base on which it can exist. With the addition of vital elements such as rules the player can understand and follow, as well as background building elements that can be discovered or interacted with during play, we begin to see a fully rounded and immersive experience take place.

The need for a rule system within video games is essential (particularly in games that allow for open exploration) Sebastian Domsch attributes them to much of the success of the player’s experience and engagement and therefore immersion. To define rules as “the most important defining characteristics of games”⁷ initially feels like a rather bold statement to make, however defining them in such a way to separate them from linear media such as novels or movies gives a deep insight into worlds and why we find them easy to immerse ourselves in. Rules (and our learning to understand them) lead us to a sense of understanding of a world and how it functions, thus giving a sense that once we know these rules, we can belong in the world that has been created. To consider that within these worlds there is rule systems, and considering videogames as a “meta-medium” – defined by Domsch as a medium with the ability to, non-reductively, incorporate all other

⁵ Wolf, Mark J. P. *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Sub creation*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2012. P 17.

⁶ Wolf, Mark J. P. *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Sub creation*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2012. P 17.

⁷ Domsch, Sebastian. *Storyplaying: Agency and Narrative in Video Games*, De Gruyter, Inc., 2013. Print. P 15.

presentational media (spoken text, written text, music, images etc.) within itself without this media being lessened by being part of a video game – we are provided perspective into the many layers that can be added to a video game's world to create something that is well populated, has deep backstory and is an effective vessel for storytelling and world building to then be presented to a player as a livable experience.

God of War (2018) (*God of War*) is a video game that not only utilizes and embodies these principals but pushes the boundaries of what we can expect from these principals and how they are delivered. Through unique camera angles, incorporation of myth into the game's narrative and unique world design, the player experience is heightened to a fascinating point. Following this introduction, I will discuss *God of War* in relation to design, narrative, and player experience to further understand the sense of immersion that is created through play.

Chapter One:
God of War: Design and World Building

God of War (Santa Monica Studios, 2018) is a single player, story driven video game. It is the fourth instalment in a series about the Spartan Demi-God Kratos. Despite the Roman origins of the first three games in the series, *God of War* narrates a Norse Mythology based story arc centring around a man and his son, traveling the lands to spread the ashes of their wife and mother respectively⁸.

Upon its release, *God of War* sold more than 3.1 million units within the first three days of its launch⁹ and has since sold a staggering 19.5 million units worldwide for PlayStation 4¹⁰. In comparison to other Triple-A games, ('AAA' – Games that are made by medium to high budget companies) this is a huge number of sales. *Uncharted 4: A Thief's End*, another single player, story driven game, sold 16 million units in comparison¹¹. Not only do the sales figures show the popularity of the game, but there is also a keen player base involved with the franchise – with many new players joining the series for the first time at this point. *God of War* took the title of IGN's 2018 game of the year winning 62.2% out of 26,604,825 votes¹². Within four months of the game's release, Sony confirmed that a 'New game +' mode would be added to the game to allow eager fans to replay the game without losing any of their in-game statistics and items¹³. This indicates the immediate demand from

⁸ See Appendix 1 for full story summary.

⁹ Sarkar, Samit. "God of War becomes fastest selling PS4 exclusive ever" www.polygon.com. Web. May 3 2018. Accessed November 24 2021.

¹⁰ Moore, Logan. "God of War has sold nearly 20 million copies" www.comicbook.com. Web. October 21, 2021. Accessed November 24 2021.

¹¹ Nesterenko, Oleg. "Niko Partners: Uncharted 4 sold 16 million copies, The last of us – 20 Million". www.Gameworldobserver.com. Web. October 14 2019. Accessed November 24 2021.

¹² Bankhurst, Adam. "God of War is the winner of IGN's best video game of all time bracket". www.ign.com. Web. October 1 2021. Accessed 24 November 2021.

¹³ Sheth, Mihir. "13 reasons why you need to play God of Wars new game + mode, out today". www.blog.playstation.com. Web. August 20, 2018. Accessed November 25 2021.

fans to replay and reengage with the game. This strong fan base behind the game has continued to grow leading to much anticipation for the release of the game's sequel *God of War: Ragnarök*. *God of War* created an experience for its players that was different to other games with similar sales numbers by creating beautiful, story-guided worlds and a captivating, deeply emotional, storyline.

In exploring a single player, story driven game it is tempting to look first at this deeply emotional narrative. However, theorist Mark J.P Wolf outlines that “worlds, unlike stories, need not rely on narrative structures, though stories are always dependent on the worlds in which they take place”¹⁴. In *God of War* the world design has a huge impact on the story it houses and also the sense of immersion the game aims to achieve. This has a direct influence on the player's engagement with the media as a whole. In essence, when playing a video game, the audience is invited to step into a world that is not their own – this in itself can allow for feelings of escapism and a drive to explore and understand a new environment. While the player is invited to this world, they become both an audience and a participant. The aim of creating an imaginary world can be to “pull their audience in so skilfully that not only is one's imagination stimulated without much conscious effort, but the whole experience is a pleasurable one”¹⁵. This is particularly true of video games: keeping an audience situated and engaged while they play through a narrative or freely enjoy a carefully designed world is essential to the full

¹⁴ Wolf, Mark J. P. *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Sub creation*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2012. P 17.

¹⁵ Wolf, Mark J. P. *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Sub creation*, Taylor & Francis Group, 2012. P 16.

enjoyment of the piece. However, it is important to note that the game itself is not the experience of a player, but what enables the experience¹⁶. Jesse Schell explores this idea in depth in *The Art of Game Design* – likening game design to building a ship in a bottle; the designer is far removed from what they are creating¹⁷. Characters and stories are created to inhabit a world which a designer is unable to literally inhabit and instead must use a combination of elements to shape an experience that is activated through play and interaction¹⁸.

Approaching the idea that the world has been designed to house the narrative and characters of *God of War* leads us to look to what exactly game design is. Schell puts it in simpler terms stating: “game design in the act of deciding what a game should be”¹⁹. Elaborating on that, the game designer does not ultimately care about games, but the *experience* that is created by the player²⁰. Considering “without the experience, the game is worthless”²¹ as a point in reference to *God of War*, it is apparent that it is the aesthetic experience that draws us in and propels us forward. Through light, movement, sound, and the player’s ability to interact with the world and control their actions, the shape of what a game “is” begins to take form. This

¹⁶ Schell, Jesse. “The art of game design”. Elsevier, Morgan Kaufman Publishers. 2008. Print. P 10.

¹⁷ Schell, Jesse. “The art of game design”. Elsevier, Morgan Kaufman Publishers. 2008. Print. P 11.

¹⁸ Schell, Jesse. “The art of game design”. Elsevier, Morgan Kaufman Publishers. 2008. Print. P 11.

¹⁹ Schell, Jesse. “The art of game design”. Elsevier, Morgan Kaufman Publishers. 2008. Print. P 10.

²⁰ Schell, Jesse. “The art of game design”. Elsevier, Morgan Kaufman Publishers. 2008. Print. P 10.

²¹ Schell, Jesse. “The art of game design”. Elsevier, Morgan Kaufman Publishers. 2008. Print. P 10.

act of interacting and ‘playing’ or ‘experiencing’ a video game does transfer to all different types of games – from Monopoly to large scale open world games such as *Assassins Creed: Valhalla*. This is identifiable due to designed elements of each of these games to be played, creating an experience for the player by setting up conditions and rules that the player then follows in order to engage with the designed experience.

The team at Santa Monica Studios were responsible for creating this experience within *God of War*. They set out to create the world that felt stable and complete, particularly capturing a time period within the game that implied an existence of this world long before the story of *God of War*²². While the game initially relies heavily on narrative to set the characters on their journey, the player is given the opportunity early on to learn about the world whether that be through exploring vast mountains that were once inhabited by the Giants of Norse Mythology – shown by their impressive craftsmanship and remains of culturally significant objects – or, by leaving the safety of their home area to explore a much bigger and more intimidating world.

When creating *God of War*, the team found traversing the world of pre-Viking culture to be difficult. The aim was to create a world where it was believed that the Gods roamed all over Midgard, the human realm, in the past²³. Luke Berliner, concept artist, wanted to create a world that was “before man had really settled and when gods, giants and monsters roamed the land – the

²² Shamoan, Evan. *The Art of God of War*, Dark Horse Books & Santa Monica Studios. 2018. Print. P 9.

²³ Barba, Rick. *God of War: Lore and Legends*, Dark Horse Books. 2020. Print. N page.

period when the myth was really being made”²⁴. Finding reference for this was difficult and so a very small pool of images would be used to create an entire level within the game²⁵. This initial difficulty and strain on the design lead to the team drawing from all manner of inspirations such as Celtic ruins and Indian temples. This helped to create a world that was both familiar and new²⁶. Considering this difficulty, it is worth noting that while many other cultures myths and legends focus on narrative with not much given in the way of description of worlds, Norse mythology itself does; in many of its retellings, descriptions are given of the worlds its stories inhabit. Each realm is known by a defining factor such as the fires of Muspelheim, or the Fog of Niflheim, thus giving a clear indication of what is historically expected from that realm before any additional design is considered.

Spanish concept artist José Cabrera was responsible for some of the early images of the Norse Landscape, creating a compelling piece of some Nomads skinning a troll (*Fig 1 below*). The 3D artists recreated it and it was released as part of the 2016 *God of War* E3 trailer (A video game convention). This served as a launch pad for the tone and mood of the initial stages of the game based in Midgard. Luke Berliner stated that, in regard to José Cabrera’s concept images; “we collectively picked our jaws up off the

²⁴ Shamoan, Evan. *The Art of God of War*, Dark Horse Books & Santa Monica Studios. 2018. Print. p 11.

²⁵ Shamoan, Evan. *The Art of God of War*, Dark Horse Books & Santa Monica Studios. 2018. Print. P 9.

²⁶ Shamoan, Evan. *The Art of God of War*, Dark Horse Books & Santa Monica Studios. 2018. Print. P 9.

floor and said 'that's the game... this is the direction we should go in'²⁷.



Fig. 1: Troll skinning – The Art of God of War. p

Once the initial world design was completed by the team at Santa Monica Studios, the design was then transferred into the digital world the player would then inhabit. Cory Barlog (director) used mise-en-scene to create an experience that was visually captivating for the player. Bordwell and Thompson identify mise-en-scene in film, as something that highlights the control that the director has over what appears in a scene²⁸. Deriving from theatre performances – lighting, costume, staging, makeup, and performance all play vital roles in what the audience perceives and how they experience what is presented to them. Despite being a different medium, the concept of mise-en-scene is transferable to the visual design and delivery of experience within video games. It is imperative for the director to position and guide the player through the character and scenery in the way that will help them best

²⁷ Shamoon, Evan. *The Art of God of War*, Dark Horse Books & Santa Monica Studios. 2018. Print. P 18.

²⁸ Thompson, Kristin. Bordwell, David. Smith, Jeff. "Film Art: An Introduction". McGraw-Hill Education. 2016. Print. P 113.

experience the game. The main difference between film and video games is the act of play within video games that changes the experience into a user guided one. I will be exploring the effects of video games and the experience of the user in chapter 3, Player Experience. However, it is important to consider the effect of design on experience. A well-rounded design with a strong foundation has a great impact on the user experience. In the images below (*Fig 2* and *Fig 3*), there is a stark contrast shown between the intimate, warm, home that Kratos and Atreus begin the story in and the open, imposing, landscape of the mountain they venture towards.



Fig. 2: Kratos and Atreus with Faye's Body (God of War. Dir, Cory Barlog. Santa Monica Studios 2018 (GOW))



Fig. 3: Kratos and Atreus beginning their journey towards the mountain (GOW)

This opens the world up to the characters and gives the player a comparable experience with them. In *Fig 2*, the director used mise-en-scene to create an intimate atmosphere between Kratos and Atreus. The back and side walls are visible in the shot, creating a sense of the space closing in; the characters are then forced to stand close to each other. The candlelight also highlights the shrouded body on the table, giving a sense of warmth to the room. In comparison, *Fig 3* illustrates mise-en-scene by framing the characters in the mouth of the cave they are leaving and showing the mountain in the background, surrounded by mist which creates a sense of distance and mystery to the mountain. The player is situated in this open space showing the open nature of the game. This, as a method of world building, ensures the player experiences the right feeling with each scene they are presented with.

Observing and experiencing the design work and mise-en-scene in *God of War*, it begins to suggest comparisons to Romanticism, particularly the work of Casper David Friedrich. This familiarity adds to the feeling of escapism or longing that a player might experience while traveling the world of *God of War*. Anjin Anhut, visual development artist, draws comparison to Friedrich's work and many video games in his blog "*how not to suck at game design*"²⁹. He identifies key themes to Friedrich's work namely, the desire to leave the here and now, fear/curiosity and hope for an unknown future as well as the urge to explore and visit distant places and being nostalgic for a distant past³⁰. Reflecting on these themes whilst acting as the audience or player of *God of War* it becomes very easy to see how these themes might influence the design output of the game. Particularly at momentous occasions such as Kratos and Atreus finally delivering Faye's ashes to the highest peak in

²⁹ Anhut, Anjin "Friedrich Romanticism and Games". www.howtonotsuckatgamedesign.com. 2016. Web. 28 April 2021. Accessed 19 November 2021.

³⁰ Anhut, Anjin "Friedrich Romanticism and Games". www.howtonotsuckatgamedesign.com. 2016. Web. 28 April 2021. Accessed 19 November 2021.

Jötunheim – creating a startling resemblance to Friedrichs *Wanderer above the sea fog* painting as seen below (Fig 4 and Fig 5).



Fig. 4: Kratos and Atreus on the highest peak in Jötunheim (GOW)



Fig. 5: *Wanderer above the sea fog* (Casper David Friedrich c1818)

The vast landscapes in each of these images give a sense of both the past and future, of our place in the world and of being in deep thought. This is highly important to design as it creates both a sense of conclusion and a sense that there is more to come.

Another common theme in Friedrich's Romantic paintings was to portray vast landscapes that feature natural structures, something that can once again be shown in comparison to *God of War*. The towering gate in the fog of Niflheim (*Fig 6* below) bears great resemblance to Friedrich's painting *The Abbey in the Oakwood* (*Fig 7* below). Similar colour palette and composition lead to a sense of foreboding. The dark lower half of both images' contrasts with the lighter coloured upper half/sky area and gives a sense of vastness to the landscape beyond. The vertical, dark shapes, in the form of the statues in *God of War* and the trees in Friedrich's painting frame the image slightly and draw the eye upwards to this vast sky above. In contrast to the previously referenced images, these images give a sense of approaching something rather intimidating and brings forward a sense of dread and unease, though the brighter sky gives a sense of something beyond the fog. This, in *God of War*, serves the purpose of encouraging the player forward. The curiosity of what lies beyond the gate and the thrill of navigating through the fog makes this area intriguing to navigate, just as viewing *The Abbey in the Oakwood* captures the eye and draws the viewer to explore deeper into the scenery.



Fig. 6: Kratos in Niflheim (GOW)



Fig. 7: Abbey in the Oakwood (Casper David Friedrich (c1809-1810)

Creating these comparisons invites the viewer to investigate the design of the gameplay experience of *God of War*. Key to the experience is the navigation of the world within *God of War*. There are nine realms traditionally in Norse mythology, all of which are referenced in the game. However, only six of these realms are accessible to the player via the Bi-Frost at the centre of Midgard. From a design standpoint this had the team at Santa Monica Studios creating six distinctly different worlds for players to explore, with each having a part to play in the narrative of the game. In terms of world building this was a colossal task, though it adds to the depth of the world the player can traverse and provides many opportunities for the narrative to expand.

Midgard being the central point our story stems from gives the player somewhere they can be intimately familiar with, a place they can always return to even as they traverse the other realms of Norse mythology. The design choice to have one central realm with a way point to the other realms further solidifies the feeling of familiarity to Midgard, thus greatly lending to the players feeling of immersion and belonging. I found myself, as a player of the game, regularly craving to return “home” to Midgard after spending extended periods of time traversing the other realms as it was familiar territory to me.

As the story stems from this point, the player has immediate access to the world map of Midgard. As seen in *Fig 8* below, the map provides the player

with a bird's eye view of the area. Designed by Ryan Baker, it is visually in contrast with the realistic style of the game.

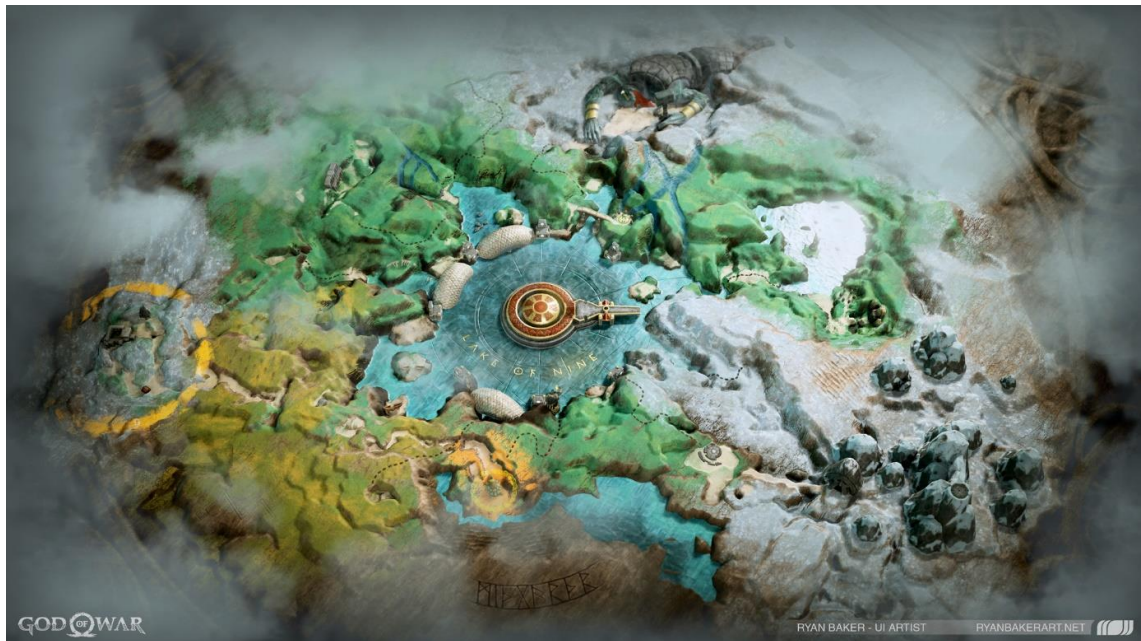


Fig. 8: The world map of Midgard (GOW)

Briar Lee Mitchell in *Game Design Essentials* notes that “Maps, genealogy charts, and personal logs or diaries are designed to match the look and feel of the worlds that are written about in the lore”³¹. In the case of *God of War*’s map; the 3D rendered, colourful and modern style does not lend to a sense of immersion for the player but rather takes the player out of the game and is a jarring experience. I certainly found this throughout my own experience playing *God of War* and would have preferred a map that was more coherent with the style of other aspects of the games such as Atreus’ bestiary, seen in *Fig 9*, which also acts as an important vessel for the narrative of the game, allowing the player to delve deeper into the constructed aspects of the gameplay experience.

³¹ Mitchell, Briar-Lee. “Game Design Essentials”. John Wiley & Sons. 2012. Print. P 48.



Fig. 9: Atreus' Bestiary (GOW)

Chapter Two:
God of War: Narrative

Having established the importance of the world design and the role of the designer within *God of War* and video games, it is then imperative to discuss narrative and story as they are an integral part of the experience a game provides. Sofia Papworth highlights the importance of realising that “games provide experiences and experiences can be expressed as stories”³². This ties into Shells idea of the game being worthless without its experience³³. Broadening the exploration of what makes this experience, we begin to look at the narrative that is housed within the world that has been created for the player to experience.

As *God of War* is centred around Norse mythology, I have chosen to use Neil Gaiman’s adaptation as a reference point. I will be using this contemporary retelling of Norse Myth to provide a clear and comprehensive overview of each myth and the characters within. In the foreword of the book, Gaiman maintains that the fun in myths is that they are told by word of mouth and encourages the reader to enjoy the stories in the book and make them their own³⁴. This mirrors Daniel McCoy’s conclusion to his book; *The Viking Spirit*, which states: “the best way to be ‘true’ to the Norse Myths and religion is to continue to reinvent them for one’s own time and place”³⁵.

Having established that the team at Santa Monica Studios used the loose descriptions of the world that these myths are contained within as a starting

³² Papworth, Sofia. “*Storytelling through Gameplay: Dimensions of AI design for Narrative Purposes*”. Umea University, Sweden. 2016. Print. P20.

³³ Schell, Jesse. “The art of game design”. Elsevier, Morgan Kaufman Publishers. 2008. Print. P 10.

³⁴ Gaiman, Neil. “Norse Mythology”. Bloomsbury. 2018. Print P XVI.

³⁵ McCoy Daniel. “The Viking spirit”. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform. 2016. Print. P 224.

point for the world they created, it becomes apparent that the game holds a narrative set within an adaptation of Norse Myth. This allowed for the same creative freedom as with the world building. In his journal *Myth, History and Theory*, Peter Heeh's notes that "Myth and history are often considered antithetical modes of explanation. Those who study data of one field tend to look down or exclude those of the other. There have always been historians – Herodotus, Livy, Burckhardt – who think it permissible to take myth seriously as myth, but this is not the same thing as taking it as a reliable account of historical occurrences"³⁶. Combining this philosophy with experimental gameplay results in a captivating narrative that is different from what we know to be fact within myth but is engaging through this very concept. From this it can be gathered that while over the years these myths and legends have been told by word of mouth and our continued discovery regarding time and place (such as the time between the 8th and 11th centuries when the Norse people raided and settled throughout Europe) gives us a contextual world to place these myths in. William K Ferrell in *Literature and Film and Modern Mythology* notes the importance of myths for understanding culture, including how this learning of time and place impacts how we then study these myths and informs us of what beliefs and values were held by cultures but also how and why beliefs may change within a culture³⁷. We are now beginning to see a merging of old tellings and retellings of myth and legend blend with our modern technology. We also begin to solidify our own versions of these tales in line with our own cultural

³⁶ Heehs, Peter. *Myth, History and Theory*. Wesleyan University, Wiley. 1994. P 11.

³⁷ Ferrell, William K. "Literature and Film as modern Mythology". Greenwood publishing group. 2002. Print. P 11.

views and actions through film, literature, music, and video games. This merging allows us to unpack the difference between what is the most historically accurate retelling of a tale and what is added for drama and effect for the current audience's enjoyment.

The team at Santa Monica Studios made many choices in their own merging of Norse Myth and the existing narrative in the *God of War* franchise. In many ways, this specific retelling is our current generations retelling of these myths. Though the changes made to it are quite far-flung from what we have heard before, the act of endeavouring to blend Norse myth into their own franchise, rather than recreating the myths as they have become known, created an incredibly captivating narrative. There is a crucial element to the changes that were made to the original myth in order to support a larger storytelling goal³⁸ in the removal of one of Norse mythologies key players: Loki. This at first seems to be a nonsensical choice, as Loki's actions in Norse myth were responsible for the feuds and even deaths of many of the Gods and Goddesses that drive these stories forward. In his book, *The Penguin Book of Norse Myths*, Kevin Crossley-Holland highlights that "without the exciting, unstable, flawed figure of Loki, there could be no change in the fixed order of things, no quickening pulses, no Ragnarök"³⁹. However, as the game progresses, we find that the character of Atreus is, in fact, Loki (See *Fig 10* below). This opens up the narrative far more than the player could have initially anticipated. The player will then experience the

³⁸ "Untangling *God of War*". YouTube, uploaded by The Good Blood. Uploaded 7 March 2021. Accessed 11 April 2021.

³⁹ Crossley-Holland, Kevin. "Norse Myths: Tales of Odin, Thor and Loki". Candlewick Press. 2017. Print. N pag.

character from an unusual angle, as a child. This is far different from the traditional interpretation of Loki (See *Fig 11* below).



Fig. 10: Atreus/Loki (GOW)



Fig. 11: Loki with a fishing net (18th century Icelandic manuscript)

Whilst this change to the core of Norse Myth was drastic, the team at Santa Monica Studios went to great lengths to not leave holes in the architecture of the myths themselves⁴⁰. During a first play through of the game, it can be difficult to see the full weight of the Norse Myths on *God of War's* narrative. The character Mimir tells tales of the Gods as the player explores freely and Atreus uses his knowledge and understanding of the Gods and their world to both educate and bridge the emotional gap he feels with his father. We meet characters from the myths and visit places from them too – but without a wider knowledge of the traditional events that unfold within them, the game delivers a very different experience.

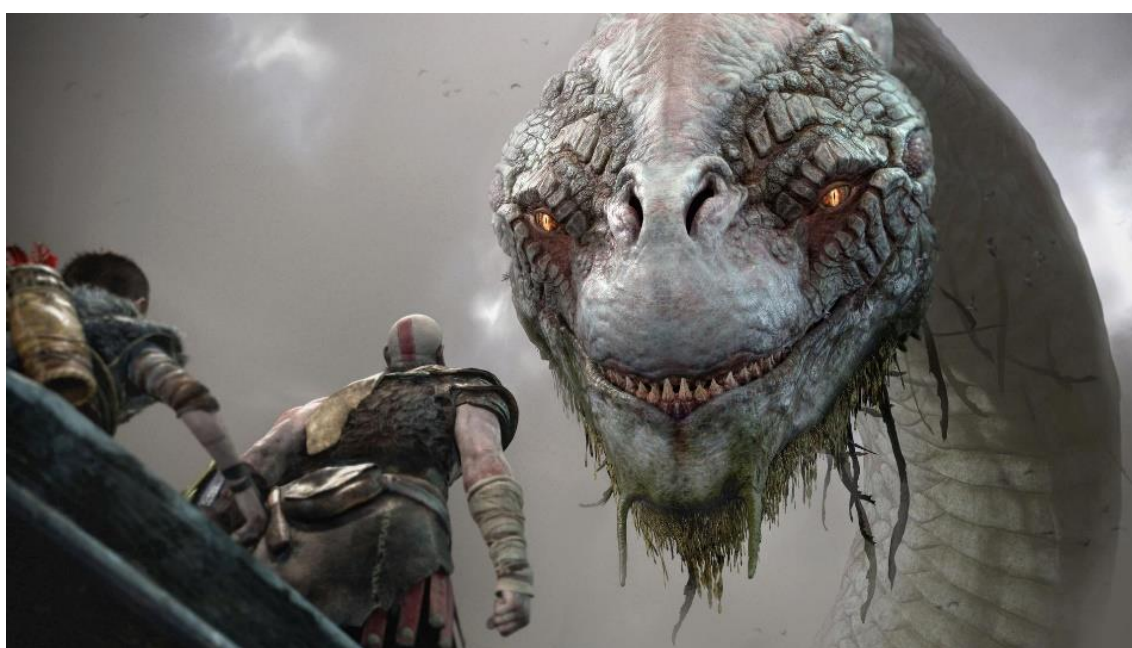


Fig. 12: Kratos and Atreus meet Jörmungandr, the world serpent. (GOW)

In Fig 12 above, we see an early game interaction with Jörmungandr the fabled “World serpent” (thrown back through time by Thor during Ragnarök). He speaks an ancient language neither of the main characters can

⁴⁰ “Untangling *God of War*”. YouTube, uploaded by The Good Blood. Uploaded 7 Mach 2021. Accessed 11 April 2021.

understand. However, upon meeting the serpent again, this time with Mimir; we learn that Jörmungandr finds Atreus familiar. Without additional knowledge of Norse Myths, it would go unnoticed by the player that Atreus, being Loki, is actually the father of Jörmungandr⁴¹. This would not become apparent until the very end of the story when we discover Atreus's true nature. It is events such as these that begin to expand the narrative of *God of War* far beyond a simple tale of a father and son on a quest to spread the ashes of their wife and mother respectively. It is then possible to begin to notice the many changes to the myths, but it can be difficult as the writing of the story of *God of War* is both seamless and engaging, leaving the mind little space to notice the changes that were made.

Sebastian Domsch delves into narrative in *Storytelling, agency, and narrative in video games*, highlighting the ludologist perspective that states the element of narrative in a video game is not necessary. A game can be still enjoyed regardless⁴². Michalis Kokonis defines the opposing idea of narratology as people who “approach games for their narrative dimension”⁴³. In the case of *God of War* – being a single player, story driven game; it is apparent that it would be best observed under a narratological lens. It can be presumed that if *God of War* had no narrative, then there would be no characters, no worlds to explore and no reason for the existing as a piece of consumable media. Domsch further explores this subject to discover that

⁴¹ Gaiman, Neil. “Norse Mythology”. Bloomsbury. 2018. Print. P 52.

⁴² Domsch, Sebastian. *Storyplaying: Agency and Narrative in Video Games*, De Gruyter, Inc., 2013. Print. P 13.

⁴³ Kokonis, Michalis. “*Intermediality between games and fiction: The “Ludology vs. Narratology” debate in computer game studies: A response to Gonzalo Frasca*”. Aristotle University, Greece. 2015. Print. P 173.

“fiction itself works like a game and that games, by being something that is not identical to reality, work like fiction”⁴⁴ and that “Narrative elements are almost as ubiquitous in video games as visual elements – and their importance and narrative complexity increases steadily”⁴⁵. *God of War* certainly fits into this as the narrative complexity is something that would not have been seen ten years ago within games – mostly enabled by the advancements in technology we have today to allow these more detailed stories to be told as video games can contain stories that span hours of gameplay in addition to free roaming exploration.

God of War’s main story takes approximately 22 hours to complete⁴⁶ giving plenty of opportunity for the player to become invested and immersed in the story and world. The additional side quests and collectables can begin to add total play time of up to 53 hours⁴⁷. This is where narrative and world begin to blend; the main storyline acts as a guide through the worlds and introduces us to the main characters within the game, but the worlds themselves lend to their own storyline in the form of optional side quests that the player is free to partake in if they wish.

Wrapped in this blanket of world building and adapted Norse myth lie the main characters of *God of War*, Kratos, and his young son Atreus. The

⁴⁴ Domsch, Sebastian. *Storyplaying: Agency and Narrative in Video Games*, De Gruyter, Inc., 2013. Print. P 14.

⁴⁵ Domsch, Sebastian. *Story playing: Agency and Narrative in Video Games*, De Gruyter, Inc., 2013. Print. P 14.

⁴⁶ Charpentier, Anton. “how long does it take to beat *God of War*?”. www.thegamer.com. Web. August 18 2021. Accessed November 25 2021.

⁴⁷ Charpentier, Anton. “how long does it take to beat *God of War*?”. www.thegamer.com. Web. August 18 2021. Accessed November 25 2021.

position of these two characters within the game is an interesting, yet not entirely unfamiliar one. We follow the father-son pair as they travel to spread the ashes of Faye, Kratos' late wife and Atreus's mother from the highest peak in all the realms. Those familiar with Joseph Campbell's "monomyth", the hero's journey, from his book *"The hero with a thousand faces"* will recognize this as the characters call to action or departure. To follow the formula set out by Campbell and explained by Laurence Coop; the characters begin to experience the struggle⁴⁸ - the is expressed in *God of War* in variety of different ways; we see a physical struggle between our protagonists and many monsters and key antagonists such as Baldur. We see a mental struggle in Kratos as he attempts to leave his previous life as a Spartan Demi-God behind. We see a physical struggle in Atreus – his lack of awareness of his status as a God leads him to develop a sickness. Above all else we see an emotional struggle between the two characters as they journey together and try to connect with and understand each other despite being very different characters. This fractured relationship drives the narrative forward. The departure of Faye, who both characters shared a unique close bond with, leaves a hole to be filled in their relationship as father and son. The journey they face is full of conflict, dysfunction and many characters that provide Kratos with a comparison to his own behaviour as a father. These act as a fulcrum at which he enacts change to become better for his son. The following of the Hero's journey drives the narrative of *God of War* onwards and facilitates the exploration of the father-son relationship. This relationship being as fractured as it is, brings to light Carl Jung's

⁴⁸ Coupe, Laurence. "The hero's journey". Gale Group. 2000. Print. P 1.

concept of parental archetypes. Due to his close relationship with his mother, Atreus struggles particularly with her loss and struggles with the expectation to create the same style of relationship with his father. It can be presumed because of Kratos' hyper-masculine portrayal that the traditional archetypical roles of males and females took place in this situation – with Kratos being referenced to being away a lot and Freya remaining at home as the primary caregiver for Atreus. As Kratos being less involved with Atreus resulted in him having a “shared identity”⁴⁹ with his mother, it then became harder for Atreus to establish a relationship with his father, partly due to Kratos having a terrible relationship with his own father (he kills him in a previous title in the *God of War* game series). Anthony Stevens, interpreting Carl Jung's work, talks about the types of love parents present to their children and a lot can be garnered from the model of Kratos and Atreus' relationship used within the game; A mother's love is identified as largely unconditional (implying the existence of the child alone is enough) whereas the fathers love is contingent (it is conditional upon the adoption of certain values, standards, and modes of conduct)⁵⁰. This is apparent in the attitude Kratos aspects of his son, deeming him weaker and “not ready”⁵¹ for the journey ahead. He requests Atreus hunts to prove to him that he is capable. As the narrative progresses, we see Atreus begin to engage Kratos' emotional side and the characters

⁴⁹ Stevens, Anthony. “Jung: A very short introduction”. Oxford University Press. 1994. Print. P 69.

⁵⁰ Stevens, Anthony. “Jung: A very short introduction”. Oxford University Press. 1994. Print. P 69.

⁵¹ “*God of War*”. Dir. Cory Barlog. Developed by SIE Santa Monica Studio. Published by Sony Interactive Entertainment. 2018.

begin to build an understanding of each other, deconstructing the typical father-son archetypes and driving the narrative forward.



Fig. 13: Kratos and Atreus sharing a rare intimate moment. (GOW)

Chapter Three:
The experience of *God of War*

Upon beginning *God of War*, we are met immediately with scenes of Kratos cutting down trees with golden handprints on them and transporting them to his home. It is an impactful, thought provoking and empathetically painful scene. This is our introduction to the main aspects that make *God of War* a unique and immersive experience. In narrative we are introduced to Kratos as a toughened character capable of carrying whole trees with one arm, and as someone who has experienced something that has impacted them in a deeply emotional way. Before chopping down the tree, Kratos lingers momentarily on the golden handprint – establishing an emotional connection. As the camera shows Kratos preparing to chop down the tree with his Axe, we are introduced to the unique cinematic style in which *God of War* delivers the blend of its narrative and world building. As the axe swings towards the tree its motion is mimicked by the camera and we are thrown towards the point of contact between the axe and tree, cutting through the golden handprint. Severing the handprint, we previously saw the character so connected with is shocking, and the involvement of the camera bring the player directly into the action.⁵²

As we draw away from this scene the camera takes its permanent position over Kratos' right shoulder. The narrative begins to unravel further as the cracks in the relationship between Kratos and Atreus begin to show and the world begins to stretch out, showing us the Norse wilds that will become home to our characters (*Fig 14*).

⁵² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hRMX9Rzq1AA>
Tree chopping: 0:10 – 3:35



Fig. 14: Kratos and Atreus on the river (GOW)

As the elements of the world and narrative begin to merge, we begin to establish more of the unique aspects of the game that create this individual immersive experience. This beginning section of the game serves as a tutorial stage in which the player gains familiarity with their surroundings, characters, and gameplay. However, the delivery of this tutorial is different from other games in that it is combined with the main storyline seamlessly so as not to break the immersion a player feels; there is no loading screen between this stage and the main game, there is no pause to the narrative or journey the characters are on.

This is also where one of the most defining features of the game really takes hold; the game is played entirely using the cinematic technique of continuous shot. The player, as the camera, is presented with a single, unbroken, tracking shot of the game and all the elements within it. We, as the player, are required to draw our focus to a particular event in the world, we shift from our over-the-shoulder, third person view. The camera moves in seamless

transition to what we are required to look at. The camera moves with the characters in a distinctly cinematic and dramatic fashion as they jump and run, beginning to give the players a sense that they are involved in something akin to a film. The camera will then glide back to the over-the-shoulder perspective and the game continues to progress. Due to its immersive nature, it is difficult to notice this camera technique at first, giving more weight to the fact that there is huge immersive value in never looking away.

Director Cory Barlog notes that there is only “six to eight tricks”⁵³ in the whole game that allow the immersive camera to work. This includes aspects of the game such as when characters squeeze through a gap in a rock, allowing the world beyond to render. It allows a unique perspective in that we see the game from Kratos’ point of view. Being a demi-God, son of Greek God Zeus, Kratos is large in stature and has a foreboding nature – the camera allows us to see the magnitude of the world around him. This allows for a sense of immediacy and connection to the characters and “an unrelenting feel to the adventure that you can’t get in any other way”⁵⁴. We experience everything in real time as the characters do; we are only seeing the world as Kratos sees it whether that be monsters jumping into view or Atreus running ahead to explore – we see it all at the same time as the character^{55,56}. This allows the narrative structure and world design to progress in an individual way that is

⁵³ Kuchera, Ben “*God of War’s* camera was a huge risk that paid off – the value in never looking away”. www.polygon.com April 23 2018. Web. 19 March 2021.

⁵⁴ Kuchera, Ben “*God of War’s* camera was a huge risk that paid off – the value in never looking away”. www.polygon.com April 23 2018. Web. 19 March 2021.

⁵⁵ Kuchera, Ben “*God of War’s* camera was a huge risk that paid off – the value in never looking away”. www.polygon.com April 23 2018. Web. 19 March 2021.

⁵⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hRMX9Rzq1AA> Atreus Running Ahead: 10:40 – 12:00

not seen in other games of similar budget and status. *Assassins Creed: Valhalla* exists entirely in third person (see Fig 15 below), with loading screens and cut scenes that allow for world elements to load in, even though it is a massively open world game⁵⁷. This type of delivery allows the player to experience the full scope of the world around them as the camera is far back from them. Other games such as *Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War* (Fig 16) utilize a first-person camera to create an up-close experience to the action, intensifying the experience. What makes *God of War*'s camera more successful in its delivery of immersion is that it allows the player to completely inhabit their role as controller of the character whilst still allowing them to experience the full scope of the world around them.



Fig. 15: *Assassins Creed Valhalla*'s third-person camera (*Assassins Creed: Valhalla*. Dir Eric Baptizat.

Ubisoft. 2020)

⁵⁷ MKAU Gaming. *Assassin's Creed Valhalla – Review*". www.mkaugaming.com. Web. November 10 2020. Accessed Jan 7 2022.



Fig. 16: *Call of Duty: Black Ops cold war's first-person camera.* (*Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War.* Dir. Corky Lehmkuhl, Dan Vondrak. Activision. 2020)

Emma Westcott highlights this core engagement as something that will “manifest through a players representation of action in game”⁵⁸. As the game progresses, we establish the world and narrative our protagonists and antagonists are navigating (as well as how this is visually delivered to the player), we must now look at how the player engages with the character they are controlling. The player is responsible for everything the character will now “do”. Westcott likens this experience to a form of puppetry in their discussion of how the player character acts as a preforming object. The player character is this puppet and we, the players, control this puppet with a mouse and keyboard or a handheld controller. Further enhancing this feeling of control using an object is external factors such as Dualshock controller rumble (in

⁵⁸ Westcott, Emma. “The player character as Preforming Object”. NSAMD, University of Wales. 2009. Print. P 1.

the case of the PlayStation 4⁵⁹); which provides basic physical response to events within the game via vibration within the controller in the players hands. Even more immersive than this is the Haptic Feedback (in the case of the PlayStation 5⁶⁰ controller) which uses advanced vibration technology to provide precise vibration and even response to environmental factors such as rain. Westcott deduces that, in digital gaming, “the player is always an audience to their own play act”⁶¹ How then does this lend to creating an immersive experience?

From my own experience, this act of play and recognizing the player character as an object in which to ‘play’ with creates a wonderfully well-rounded experience in which I feel in control – as though I am choosing my character’s actions in a way that will create the ‘performance’ I will most engage with. This act of puppetry does not only apply to situations in which the world and narrative create a path I can follow at my own pace; it applies also to situations such as when the player wonders “can I get up there?” when looking at a high ledge above. The ability to control our character and push the limits of the world and character then creates a different experience. While the player is still completely bound by the restrictions that the game developers have laid out, it is their choice if they would like to spend their time attempting to get up on the ledge. Whether this takes 30 seconds or 15 minutes to do so, regardless of result – it is their own choice as puppet

⁵⁹ “PS4 tech specs”. www.playstation.com. Web. Website 2022. Accessed January 11 2022.

⁶⁰ “Dualsense wireless controller” www.playstation.com. Web. Website 2022. Accessed January 11 2022.

⁶¹ Westcott, Emma. “The player character as Preforming Object”. NSAMD, University of Wales. 2009. Print. P 2.

master. This combined with the seamless deliverance of all these elements in continuous shot, creates an almost water-tight experience for the player, continuously working to draw them in and engage them in the gameplay. Combining player character, world building, narrative structure and delivery of these elements begins to shape what makes the gameplay of *God of War* truly different and immersive. However, the gameplay itself must also be placed under scrutiny in order to define what the player is truly being presented with.

Establishing the *type* of video game that is being played has great significance on engagement and immersion. Jesper Juul explores computer games as a whole and identifies two key structures: Emergence and Progression. Both of these structures create enjoyable and engaging instances of play, but which is better for immersion? The foundation of games of emergence relies on “a small number of rules combining to form interesting variation”⁶² which then results in the player needing to design strategy to gain the best result out of the game. Juul likens this to many card or board games though states it is also present in “most action and all strategy games”. The concept of progression is a newer structure in which “the player must perform a predefined set of actions in order to complete the game”⁶³. This style is heavily influenced and controlled by the designer; they choose what actions the player will have to complete in order to advance in the game. Progression has been largely made possible by advances in

⁶² Juul, Jesper. "The Open and the Closed: Games of Emergence and Games of Progression." CGDC Conf. 2002, P 342.

⁶³ Juul, Jesper. "The Open and the Closed: Games of Emergence and Games of Progression." CGDC Conf. 2002. P 342.

technology in which developers and designers can now create games that have hours of play time giving the opportunity for more actions and tasks before the completion of the game. However, modern games do often hold aspects of both. This is what makes the gameplay itself of *God of War* appealing. Juul identifies this combination in relation to the game *Everquest*; a massively multiplayer online role playing game. On a surface level, it is a game of emergence. The events in the game are not explicitly determined by the game rules but they follow certain, identifiable, patterns. However, *Everquest* contains a large number of quests in which characters in the game world give objectives for the players to complete, thus bringing aspects of progression into the game. *God of War* is similar to this in that, on surface level, we are presented with a linear storyline to progress through with certain checkpoints and events that must happen in order to advance the game (*Fig 17*). In addition to this progressive gameplay, there is also optional quests that *may* be completed should the player want to which lend to the style of emergence in the form of quests such as defeating the Valkyries (*Fig 18*); an enclosed space for repetitive, strategy based, combat⁶⁴. It is this combination of Emergence and Progression that prompts further immersion within the game as the player is allowed to engage in both styles of play and is not restricted to one or the other, thus keeping gameplay diverse and engaging.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Valkyrie fight: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6QqlIDSuVu0> 0:00-5:00

⁶⁵ Juul, Jesper. "The Open and the Closed: Games of Emergence and Games of Progression." CGDC Conf. 2002. P 342.



Fig. 17: Typical Gameplay within God of War (linear progression) (GOW)



Fig. 18: A Fight with a Valkyrie (Emergence gameplay) (GOW)

Within these two styles of gameplay and their combination to create something that is beyond what is typically expected from these two structures we begin to see the previously mentioned concept of video games exiting as

a “meta-medium” emerge. This is something that video games as a whole can offer as an experience more so than any other medium can.

Within *God of War*, the Jotnar Shrines (*Fig 19*) provide an excellent demonstration of how an external medium, in this case a piece of cultural artwork, can provide depth to the world and highlight the narrative history of that world without changing or impacting the overall immersive experience or cohesion of the design of the game. They provide the characters with an opportunity to delve deeper into their own world. This type of detailed addition overall is a great contribution to the immersion and depth that the game presents.



Fig. 19: A Jotnar shrine in the game, depicting Sköll and Hati chasing the sun. (GOW)

The same holds true for the previously referenced notes that Atreus takes throughout the game on the various monsters and place they encounter. The style of these notes' ties in nicely with the world that has been created and

the interest Atreus has within this world. These are in an unfortunate combination with the previously mentioned game menu style. Despite this, these notes are an excellent example of another type of media being combined with the media of a video games to provide a better well-rounded experience for the player that provides them with more information and context to the world they are inhabiting.

Compiling all of these aspects into one video game lends to creating a multifaceted experience that provides the player with an intense sense of immersion and a truly unique gameplay experience. This is a direct result of all of the different elements that went into shaping *God of War* as a player experience. The design team at Santa Monica Studios and director Cory Barlog went to great lengths to create a game that is different from others in its bracket at the time. The conscious decisions on design, narrative and gameplay coupled with the innovative delivery of these elements through camera technique and balanced gameplay have created an experience for the player that is consciously immersive.

Conclusion

Combining all of the elements of world building, design and narrative creates an experience of play that is truly unique. Gaining knowledge of each different element that goes into making a game like *God of War* allowed me to gain insight into what truly makes up a game and why the choices in *God of War* were different from other games in the same genre. The immersive nature of *God of War* derives from the decisions made to push the limits of what games could do at the time especially regarding camera and narrative. Creating a huge game with a highly detailed narrative that gives a fresh take on Norse Mythology paid off.

From start to end the experience is an enjoyable one, the player quickly forms a bond with the journey that Kratos and Atreus are on, driven forward by the desire to see the characters mend their broken relationship. Those knowledgeable about Norse Mythology will be faced with familiar characters and tales while those new to the world of Norse Myth will be taken in by the rich new world. The world of *God of War* supports these stories well and provides a well thought out selection of realms for the player to explore.

As this was a unique take on what a video game could achieve at the time, the progression of the *God of War* game series has a lot to live up to. Cory Barlog shared that 40% of the team on *God of War* said, regarding games being made, “this is how we should totally do this from now on”⁶⁶. With the upcoming sequel *God of War: Ragnarök*, there is a sense of pressure from

⁶⁶ Kuchera, Ben “*God of War*’s camera was a huge risk that paid off – the value in never looking away”. www.polygon.com April 23 2018. Web. 19 March 2021.

the fan base of the game to produce something of similar, or better, quality. With the technological advancements seen in the last 5 years, particularly in the form of the PlayStation 5 and its Dualsense controller adding even more immersive elements to gameplay, the anticipation for the release of *Ragnarök* is at an all-time high. However, Barlog has stated this will be the last in the Norse portion of the *God of War* Series, referring to the long production times, that only result in “one thing”⁶⁷. Considering both the time and cost it takes to make an expansive game like *God of War*, it is easy to see why Barlog and the team at Santa Monica Studios decided to restrict the Norse narrative to two iterations – even if the games are a source of much critical acclaim.

Beyond these two games, it will be intriguing to see where games like *God of War* advance to, with so many games being released on the PlayStation each year (980 games in 2021⁶⁸) - there is a constant need for originality. While pushing the boundaries of how the player experiences the game is starting to become a popular approach, players bond with characters and expect to see stories continue, and the characters to grow and change. It will be interesting to see how the *God of War* fan base reacts to the conclusion of this series arc. It will also be interesting to see where the series goes next; will Kratos’ story end with this iteration of the game? Will Atreus become the next *God of War* for us to follow even though he, at this point, does not seem

⁶⁷ Franzese, Tomas “*God of War: Ragnarök*. Cory Barlog reveals why there won’t be a Norse trilogy” www.inverse.com. Web. 16 September 2021. Accessed 1 March 2022.

⁶⁸ Makuch, Eddie “*Here’s how many video games released in 2021...*” www.gamespot.com. Web. 4 January 2022. Accessed 1 March 2022.

to fit the role? Due for release in 2022⁶⁹, players hope *Ragnarök* will bring answers to these questions. Given the excellent delivery of *God of War*, I have high hopes for this sequel and how it will be delivered. Current information on the game shows an older Atreus, desperate to find out the truth about himself as “Loki”. We see hints to other realms to be discovered and even a glimpse at a young Angrboda – Loki’s wife in Norse Mythology.



Fig 20: Kratos and Atreus exploring the realms in *God of War: Ragnarök*. (2022)

As seen above in Fig 20, there has been significant upgrades to the graphical quality and world building in *God of War: Ragnarök*. The image above was captured on the PlayStation 5 and so can be assumed to be making full use of the hardware’s capabilities. Beyond advanced graphics and controllers that allow you to feel aspects of the game through it as it is being played, there have also been advancements in Virtual Reality. Large, story driven, single player games such as *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, have been ported to Virtual Reality⁷⁰, though the ability to play in first person lent

⁶⁹ “*God of War: Ragnarök*” www.playstation.com. Web. 2022. Accessed 1 March 2022.

⁷⁰ “*Skyrim: VR*” www.store.playstation.com. Web. Accessed 1 March 2022.

heavily to its success. It would be difficult to adapt a game like *God of War* to virtual reality, as it relies so heavily on the view of the game the director intended in order to deliver the experience that has been designed.

Therefore, I do not believe the advancements in virtual reality would be beneficial to the *God of War* series, although it certainly holds great opportunity for other games.

Overall, there is great promise for video games in the future to gain traction in our everyday lives. Moving from our arcade parlors to our living rooms at an alarming rate shows the need in the market for more unique and engaging games, using each technological advancement to the fullest. Improved graphics for beautifully designed worlds, better software allowing hours of gameplay for rich, intricate, storylines and advanced hardware to take the player into the gameplay as much as possible provide experiences that seem to get better and better as time goes by.

God of War certainly stands out from other games of its time, leading the way for a promising sequel and the continuation of video games becoming immersive and engaging experiences.

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Appendix I

God of War: Story Summary

The game begins with Kratos chopping down trees that have golden handprints on them. These are the handprints of his late wife Faye and he is collecting these trees as per her wish for her burial pyre. He carries a tree over his shoulder towards a small rowing boat where his son awaits him. They return home and preform the burial ceremony for Faye, they then set out hunting together so that Atreus can prove to Kratos he is ready for what lies ahead. Upon returning home Kratos and Atreus are visited by the antagonist Baldur. Atreus hides whilst Baldur and Kratos fight, Kratos seemingly kills Baldur. Atreus and Kratos then set off on their journey to scatter Faye's ashes from the highest peak in all the realms.

On their journey they soon encounter the Witch of the Woods, who recognizes Kratos as a God. They reach the lake of the 9 Realms and they encounter the world serpent, Jörmungandr. They also encounter dwarves: Brok and Sindri, who they frequently meet along their journey and provide them with upgrades for their weapons and armor. They continue their journey to the tall mountain and are met with a black mist they cannot pass. The witch of the Woods appears and tells them to use the Bifrost to travel to the realm of Alfheim to get its light to remove the mist. Upon their success they reach Midgard's peak and nearing the top, they overhear a conversation with Baldur – confirming he is not dead. After they leave, Kratos and Atreus climb to the peak and are met with Mimir, who tells them that the highest peak is in fact in Jötunheim. Travel to this realm is impossible however as the giants

wanted to keep out Odin and Thor. Mimir tells Kratos and Atreus he knows of another way and instructs Kratos to chop his head off so that he can be brought with them as he is imprisoned in a tree. Kratos does so and takes the head to the Witch of the Woods to revive it. Mimir then reveals the Witch of the Woods to be Freya, God of Vanaheim. Both Freya and Mimir warn Kratos that he should tell Atreus of his true nature, however, Kratos' long distrust of the Gods causes him to ignore them.

Kratos and Atreus begin their search for the components to open Jötunheim's portal. As they travel the realm they are attacked by Thor's son's (Baldur's Nephews) Magni and Modi. Kratos kills Magni and Modi flees. At this next encounter Kratos fights him, but Atreus collapses, overcome by sickness. Kratos rushes Atreus to Freya, hoping she can help him. She warns him again that this is the result of Kratos not telling Atreus that he is, in fact, a God. The conflict itself causing the sickness. Freya tends to Atreus and sends Kratos to Helheim to retrieve the heart of a troll in Helheim she needs to treat Atreus. Kratos returns home to retrieve his old weapons, the blades of chaos. These weapons being fire based work in the cold realm of Helheim as opposed to his frost-based Leviathan Axe. Traversing Helheim, Kratos retrieves the heart of the troll, he is then haunted by a vision of his father, Zeus. Mimir is then able to piece together Kratos' past. Upon returning to Freya, Atreus is successfully revived. They then continue on their journey. Kratos finally tells Atreus of his true nature. Atreus embraces the revelation and becomes increasingly arrogant. He then murders Modi against his father's wishes.

They return to Midgard's peak, and are ambushed by Baldur, the fight that ensues results in the Jötunheim portal being destroyed and all of the characters falling deep into Helheim.

The time spent journeying back from Helheim and traversing its treacherous land, provides an opportunity for Kratos and Atreus to make amends. They observe Baldur witnessing a hallucination of Freya; they learn that she is his mother and is responsible for placing the immortality spell on him. They return to Midgard and try to come up with another route to Jötunheim. Mimir comes up with another plan, but he will need his missing eye for it and this is contained within the belly of Jörmungandr. Upon its retrieval, the group are attacked by Baldur once again. This time Freya intervenes and attempts to make amends with her son. During the fight, Baldur is pierced by one of Atreus' arrows that contains mistletoe, the one thing that can harm Baldur. This breaks his curse and he proceeds to try and strangle Freya. Kratos intervenes and kills Baldur, causing Freya to vow she will extract vengeance on Kratos. When she leaves, Kratos tells Atreus of his own past and how he killed his own father. Kratos tells Atreus it is their job to be better than what came before them. Mimir hopes that Freya will come to understand Kratos's intent and forgive him with time.

Kratos and Atreus then travel to Jötunheim, leaving Mimir with Brok and Sindri. They find a temple of the giants, and a great mural depicting the adventures of Kratos and Atreus. They discover that Freya was a giant and that Atreus was referred to as 'Loki' by his mother. Kratos and Atreus finally

spread Faye's ashes from the highest peak in Jötunheim. Upon their return, Mimir warns them that Fimbulwinter has begun, meaning Ragnarök will soon follow.

Gameplay videos:

***God of War* full gameplay video:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hRMX9Rzq1AA>

Tree chopping: 0:10 – 3:35

Camera and Atreus running ahead: 10:40 – 12:00

Valkyrie Fight:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6QqllDSuVu0>

0:00-5:00