

REDEEMING THE MONSTER:  
THE GOD OF WAR SUBREDDIT'S NARRATIVE OF REBIRTH FOR HEGEMONIC  
MASCULINITY

by

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## ABSTRACT

In a 2019 documentary on the development of the video game *God of War* (2018) for the Playstation 4, Cory Barlog, the game's creative director, openly discusses his desire to give the toxic, hypermasculine protagonist, Kratos, a "second chance" after nearly a decade since the franchise's previous installment. In giving Kratos his second chance, Barlog decided to make him a father, claiming that becoming a father changes one's perspective on everything. Video games scholars have argued that games are a noteworthy element of players' identities and interactions due to their promotion of the manufacture of player narratives. The following research is a virtual ethnography of the *God of War* subreddit community where I seek to understand how *God of War's* (2018) ludonarrative, the intersection between a game's narrative and gameplay elements, serves as a sense-making resource for players to defend hegemonic masculinity. Through a textual analysis of *God of War* subreddit threads, I identify and discuss the implications of the community's construction of three narratives ("Disparaging His Past," "Affirming His Struggle;" and "Acknowledging His Embrace") that support and defend Kratos's "second chance" from feminist critique.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Being better than who you were in the past or to be better than those who came before you are not uncommon goals. In a 2018 interview with gaming news website Polygon, Cory Barlog, the creative director of *God of War* (2018), was asked to discuss the evolution of Kratos, the toxic, hypermasculine franchise protagonist, since his last appearance in 2010; specifically, the interviewer asks Barlog about the conversations the development team had during the writing process about toxic masculinity and the ways it gets instilled in young boys (Plante, 2018). Barlog talks about his own experience as a father to a son playing a major role in the game's development: "This lesson that I hoped to pass on to my son: that the concepts of strength and emotional vulnerability... are not two warring or diametrically opposed concepts." He goes on to identify Kratos as an exceptional example to demonstrate masculinity's relationship between these two concepts discussing his Spartan upbringing. As a young Spartan boy, Kratos entered the *agōgē*, Sparta's strict, mandatory education program that centered the forging of young boys into fearsome warriors (Kennell, 1995). Barlog states, "The Spartans were turned into machines, instruments of war, and to have that be the way you're ushered into your formative years, it will absolutely turn you into what Kratos became" (Plante, 2018). In discussing the changes since the Greek arc, the games in the series before *God of War* (2018), many fans on the *God of War* subreddit were happy to see Kratos's development as a character.



The originary Greek arc for the *God of War* franchise establishes Kratos as a tragic antihero. Antiheroes are “protagonists...[who act] in morally ambiguous, and at times unjustifiable ways, if even to reach noble goals” (Shafer & Raney, 2012, p. 1029). Kratos embodies the role of antihero for his numerous questionable actions and lack of compassion for those he victimizes throughout the series. In the three major titles of *God of War’s* Greek arc, Kratos rarely acts selflessly or demonstrates any remorse for his actions leading *God of War* players to come to a clear understanding of Kratos as aggressive, violent, and self-serving. These characteristics and others are identified by Barlog and the other employees of Santa Monica Studios in *Raising Kratos*, a documentary about *God of War’s* (2018) development (Akiaten, 2019). Barlog’s recognition of Kratos being characterized as “a rage-filled crazy guy” served as the major influence for the new installment’s narrative. He states that he did not want to “just make another *God of War* game” but instead was interested in how the story would play out if Kratos got a “second chance,” referencing how becoming a father changed his perspective on everything.

Video games<sup>1</sup> are a definitive entertainment medium for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Research shows that 72% of men and 49% of women between the ages of 18 and 29 play video games “sometimes” or “often” (Perrin, 2018). From the “hardcore” gamers who fully immerse themselves in their favorite game worlds and participate in fan discussions online to the “casuals” who play a few rounds of Candy Crush Saga (King, 2012) to kill

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<sup>1</sup> Among games scholars there is some discussion about the appropriate terminology to use to define the medium. Ruggill, McAllister, and Menchaca (2004) argue for the use of “computer game” rather than video game as it is the game’s computation that facilitates interactivity more so than its visual elements. While I do not disagree, I use “video game” throughout this paper for the sake of readers’ common familiarity with the term.

time, the identity of gamer encompasses a diverse community of video game players. Beyond simply being used to play video games, the multiple functions of home consoles like Sony's Playstation, Microsoft's XBOX, and the Nintendo Switch have made them "do-everything" entertainment machines. They can be used to stream movies and television shows through services like Netflix or Hulu, listen to one's favorite music through Spotify, and connect with others through sharing their in-game accomplishments on social media. While some may still think of video games as trivial, their popularity has noteworthy economic and social significance.

One popular claim that that has been used to justify the study of video games is their economic significance (Williams, 2006). According to data released by the Electronic Software Association (2019), the United States video game industry had record revenue of \$43.4 billion in 2018, an 18 percent growth from the previous year. Individual video game franchises are among the most successful media franchises in terms of revenue. For example, *Pokémon*, the Japanese video game franchise, is the most successful media franchise of all time having earned over \$90 billion in total revenue (Katz, 2019). Beyond revenue, massively multiplayer online (MMO) games have been studied for the ways the in-game economy influences real-world trading. With a gross national product per capita between Russia and Bulgaria, a 2001 study found that the real-world trading of *EverQuest's* (Verant Interactive & 989 Studios, 1999) currency and materials exchanged at a rate of USD 0.0107, making it the 77<sup>th</sup> largest economy in the world at the time (Castronova, 2001). The accrued revenue and economic impact of the video game industry serves as evidence of their pervasiveness within society.

Even with video games solidifying as mainstream entertainment, the perception of the gamer as the awkward, anti-social outcast living in their mother's basement persists. However, with the increasing popularity of online gaming, this perception is not necessarily accurate. Despite the disappearance of public spaces for community building, such as arcades, Williams (2006) argues that social elements of video games have taken new virtual forms. Reddit, the virtual gathering space studied here, is just one space where gaming communities thrive. Steinkuehler (2006), in her study of MMO gaming, identifies participation in these virtual worlds as active participation in a discourse.

Discourse communities are those groups which adhere to and perpetuate certain discourses (Steinkuehler, 2006). The virtual MMO game worlds of Steinkuehler's research serve as only one specific context through which these communities emerge. She argues that discourse communities deserve attention for the ways that participation shapes an individual's understanding of their world. Similarly, Plummer (1995) suggests that the relationship between narrative and community shapes understandings of identity. Due to their shared history and attachment to a particular thing, fan communities serve as an exemplar for further investigating Plummer's assertion. Specifically, fan communities of video games provide a unique opportunity for the investigation of player experiences being both shared and unique.

The simultaneity of player experiences in video games being shared and unique stems from the different narrative trajectories featured in video games. Fan experiences of video games are shared in the sense that in playing through the same game, the game's narrative becomes familiar. Yet, these experiences are simultaneously unique because the completion of in-game tasks may happen in different orders and/or players may struggle

at different parts. In understanding narrative's power to shape conceptualizations about different phenomena, the common familiarity of a game's narrative provides context for the forming of cohesive communities where unique experiences with the game can be shared and understood. For these reasons, composite research on video games, their narratives, and their fan communities is important to understanding their significance to players' lives, identities, and interactions.

The *God of War* (SCE Santa Monica Studio, 2005) video game franchise is among Playstation's most successful (IGN News, 2018; Yin-Poole, 2012). Fans have deepened their attachment to the series and to one another through creating a community on Reddit where they gather and discuss the series together. As of April 29, 2020, the *God of War* subreddit has 117,850 subscribers. The purpose of this ethnography is to better understand how fans of *God of War*, as a subset of a larger gaming culture, make sense of masculinity through sharing their gameplay experiences in this virtual space.

In the following chapter, I review relevant literature associated with video game communities, masculinities, and ludology and narratology. The purpose of the following section is to argue that the ludonarrative of a video game, the interweaving of a game's narrative and gameplay elements, serves as a resource for players to understand gender—ultimately guiding me to my core research question. The third chapter (Method) presents background information on traditional and virtual ethnography to explain my approach to understanding the sense-making strategies of *God of War* subreddit members that aids in their understanding of masculinity. Additionally, it provides background information on the *God of War* subreddit community, along with the strategies I use for collecting and analyzing data. The fourth chapter (Findings) identifies three strategies that the *God of*

*War* subreddit community employ to defend Kratos's masculinity against feminist critique to "prove" that he has been redeemed of his problematic past. Finally, the sixth and seventh chapters (Discussion and Conclusion) discuss these strategies and the relevance that this virtual ethnography has for the "real" world.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Video Game Communities**

A sizable portion of video games research has centered its focus on gaming communities (Gray, 2012; Kim, 2014; Pearce, 2009; Steinkuehler, 2006). Much of this research on has focused on the communities established in virtual game worlds (Pearce, 2009; Steinkuehler, 2006) and addresses how communities develop around shared engagement with particular games. The research of Pearce (2009) and Steinkuehler (2006) each demonstrate the unique cultures and community-building power of the virtual worlds of *Uru* and *Lineage* and the fan websites and forums dedicated to those worlds.

While research on communities developed *in* virtual game worlds is plentiful, the study of communities built *around* virtual game worlds is less common. However, the study of virtual platforms and their potential for community has been the focus of Zizi Papacharissi's (2014; 2016) work. Extending her previous work, Papacharissi (2016) investigates the feelings of connectedness that virtual spaces offer their occupants. Specifically, she focuses on Twitter as offering (soft) structure for storytelling, where participants collaboratively construct, facilitate, and distribute news stories. With the live streaming of gameplay being a relatively recent phenomenon, I imagine research on streaming communities are in-progress with T. L. Taylor's (2018A; 2018B) research on Twitch being an early foundation. Twitch is a rapidly growing platform that allows for players to stream their gameplay. Originally centered around the live streaming of video

games, which still makes up the vast majority of content, Twitch has expanded to include streams of music performances, cooking, art, and live sports. Taylor's (2018A) research focuses on the communities that develop from the work that streamers do to shift their private play into public entertainment.

### Identification and Interactivity

Beyond research focused on how players connect and identify with other players in virtual spaces, games scholars have begun researching how players connect and identify with video game characters (Gee, 2003; Shaw, 2013). Cohen (2001) defines identification specifically as it relates to connection with mediated characters. Cohen asserts that his definition of identification as a process of "adopting the identity and perspective of a character" helps resolve issues with previous definitions that conceptualize identification as an emotion or attitude toward the character (p. 251). He argues that a process-based understanding frames identification as "internalizing a point of view rather than... projecting one's own identity onto someone or something else (p. 252). Put simply, the process of identification, as described by Cohen (2001), as it pertains to video games does not simply happen when players see characters with similar identities to their own; identification happens when players recognize their worldview and experiences as being aligned with the game's ludonarrative. Based on the interactive nature of video games, this process explains why games play such a significant role in the lives of their players.

The interactivity of video games provides players with significant opportunities for identification (Gee, 2003; Wolf, 2001). The interactivity of video games depends on games being simultaneously active and reflective. The influence that the player's

decision-making has on the game world demonstrates the ways that video games are active, while the influence the game has on the player's choices demonstrate how they're reflective. Through allowing for an interactive identification, video games surpass the more passive identification provided through other entertainment media such as novels and films (Gee, 2003). Gee discusses a "tripartite of identities" in video games that comprises the real identity of the player, the virtual identity of the character, and the projective identity of the player on the character. While the real and virtual identities are straightforward, Gee stresses that the projective identity is perhaps the most important to understanding the power of games. The process of the projective identity "[sees] the character as one's own project in the making... a creature whom I imbue with a certain trajectory through time defined by my aspirations for what I want that character to be and become" (Gee, 2003, p. 55). The projective identity demonstrates both active and reflective identification in how players' decision-making process develops the virtual character and how that development affects future decisions of the player. Put simply, the projective identity informs our understanding of how interactivity emerges in gameplay.

The interactive nature and projective potential of video games also informs how players make meaning of their gameplay (Hayes, 2007; Shaw, 2013). In her research on the emergence of gendered identities for women during gameplay, Hayes finds that players reframe undesirable elements of gameplay to more closely align with their real-world identities. Both participants were initially hesitant about combat and killing in constructing their video game characters and avoided those elements in their gameplay; however, as they progressed through the game, each woman embraced combat and killing "in ways that recruited her real-life identity" (Hayes, 2007, p. 42).



Finally, previous literature also identifies a myriad of video game aspects that play a role in influence attitudes about gender: the effects of gameplay (Blackburn & Scharrer, 2018; Kirkland, 2009); player identification with characters (Gabbiadini, Riva, Andrighetto, Volpato, & Bushman, 2016; Matthews et al., 2016; Shaw, 2013); and game genre (Gilbert, Giaccardi, & Ward, 2018; Kagen, 2018). Carr (2006) notes that early games scholarship seems to be paradoxical in its heavy focus on how games depict women, stating, “[W]hile the majority of players are reputed to be male, most of the critical attention directed at questions of gaming and gender has focused on girls and women” (p. 162). In recent years, as gaming has been (re)accused for the role it plays in real-world violence<sup>2</sup> and for the displays of overt, toxic masculinity within gaming communities since #Gamergate,<sup>3</sup> research on the relationship between video games and masculinity has rapidly proliferated.

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<sup>2</sup> After mass shootings in El Paso, TX and Dayton, OH in August 2019, President Donald Trump and House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy cited the glorification of violence and dehumanization of individuals in video games as a driving force behind these shootings (Cole, 2019). This is certainly not the first time that video games have been accused of making their players violent, and while research has shown that games have a negligible effect on violence (Mathur & VanderWeele, 2019; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2019), I don’t imagine it will be the last.

<sup>3</sup> #Gamergate was a series of harassment campaigns against women in the video game industry. After Zoë Quinn, an independent game developer, released *Depression Quest*, Quinn’s ex-boyfriend made a blogpost falsely accusing them of a relationship with a game journalist who positively reviewed *Depression Quest*. Proponents of #Gamergate claim that they sought greater ethical practices within games journalism. This has been viewed by many as a rejection of feminist and other marginalized voices gaining prominence in gaming culture. Ultimately, the toxic actions of #Gamergate proponents included the broadcasting of personal information, rape threats, and death threats towards their opponents.

## **Masculinities**

Gender theorist Judith Butler (1990) argues that gender, as a cultural phenomenon, is performatively constructed. By this, she means that gender has no solid state; however, through the repetition of specific acts, it “congeals” to resemble a substantive thing (p. 45). In discussing masculinity, Messerschmidt (1993) similarly reminds us, “Masculinity is never static, never a finished product. Rather, men construct masculinities in specific social situations” (p. 80). Through the privileging of those repeated acts that construct masculinity and the marginalizing of those repeated acts that construct femininity, a hierarchical relationship between masculinity and femininity is established (Connell, 1995; Schippers, 2007).

Hegemony operates as a hierarchical power dynamic in which a specific ideology becomes established as the dominant understanding of the world. Regarding masculinities, one mode of masculinity gets exalted as the idealized form of manhood. Connell (1995) describes hegemonic masculinity as an idealized manhood that, through its cultural acceptance, creates a hierarchical relationship to femininity which reifies the privileged position of men and the marginalized position of women. In addition to a gendered hierarchy between masculinity and femininity, Connell (1990; 1995) establishes a multiple masculinities framework which focuses on the hierarchical relationship between masculine performances. Her framework includes: hegemonic masculinity, subordinate masculinity—which symbolically blurs with notions of femininity, complicit masculinity—which does not meet the standard of hegemonic masculinity but benefits from its dominant positionality, and marginalized masculinity—those masculinities of men from marginalized populations.

The outlining of characteristics that exemplify Connell's hegemonic masculinity exceptionally demonstrates the specific cultural and temporal contexts in which these characteristics become hegemonic (Atkinson & Calafell, 2009; Kagen, 2018; Trujillo, 1991). Trujillo (1991) identifies five characteristics of hegemonic masculinity through his analysis of MLB pitcher Nolan Ryan: power through physical force and control; capitalist occupational achievement; family patriarch; frontiersmanship; and the embodiment of heterosexuality. These five characteristics are reinforced within cultural contexts as a way for hegemonically masculine men to maintain dominance over women and non-hegemonically masculine men. Atkinson and Calafell (2009) expand understandings of hegemonic masculine characteristics in establishing the avoidance of responsibility as a benefit of hegemonic masculinity. Through the utilization of gray areas, or ambiguous spaces where responsibility for one's actions becomes blurred, those embodying the idealized hegemonic masculine form can reasonably deny responsibility for their actions.

As it pertains to gaming culture, Kagen (2018) highlights geek masculinity as occupying a unique hegemonic position in its resemblance of hybrid masculinity (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). According to Bridges and Pascoe (2014), "hybrid masculinities refer to the selective incorporation of elements of identity typically associated with various marginalized and subordinated masculinities and—at times—femininities into privileged men's gendered performances and identities" (p. 246). Kagen (2018) states that geek masculinity arose within society as a "rebellion against hypermasculinity... that [prizes] intelligence and technical mastery over physical strength." However, as geek masculinity has attempted to legitimize itself, Salter and Blodgett (2012) argue that it is the "inevitable evolution of hegemonic masculinity in a culture where dominance and

technical mastery are increasingly interwoven” (p. 47). By putting Trujillo’s (1991) and Salter and Blodgett’s work in conversation with one another, hegemonic masculinity reveals its socially constructed nature and contextual idealization.

The diverse forms of masculinity discussed by Connell (1990; 1995), Trujillo (1990), and Kagen (2018) indicates the non-natural, socially constructed origin of masculinity. Video gameplay intimately connects to Butler’s (1990) theory of gender being performatively constructed in how repeated gameplay solidifies understandings of what it means to be masculine or feminine. By this, I don’t necessarily mean that players are replaying the same game over and over again. Instead, as certain narratives and gameplay mechanics become dominant across the video game industry, they foster the congealing of particular modes of masculinity and femininity. People’s consumption of media plays a strong role in the construction of their gendered identity; within gaming, the ludic (gameplay) elements and narratives of video games are just two aspects that work to shape this identity.

### **Ludology and Narratology**

The study of video games as narrative was a contested point early in the relatively short lifespan of game studies. As game studies burgeoned as an academic interest in the late 1990s, a paradigmatic debate seemingly erupted between ludology—studying games as games—and narratology—studying games as narratives (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, & Tosca, 2008). While Frasca (2003) has attempted to mitigate the debate, others recognize it as a tension that still “bubbles away beneath the surface” of games studies (Crawford & Gosling, 2009, p. 54). So, while the ludic versus narrative debate may be a bit outdated (and perhaps a bit overblown), the purpose of its inclusion here serves as a recognition of

how the debate in the field's nascency shaped certain understandings of what it means to study video games.

### Ludology

In Frasca's (1999) introduction of ludology, he presents it as a "yet non-existent discipline that studies game and play activities." Others have claimed that a ludologic approach to studying video games emphasizes a focus on gameplay and game structure instead of focusing on the narrative potential of games (Egenfeldt-Nielsen et al., 2008). However, Frasca recognizes that *ludus* (the Latin word for "game") and narrative have some similarities; specifically, he discusses how sessions of certain *ludus*, like adventure games, produce narratives. Nonetheless, he argues that *producing* narratives and *being* narrative are distinctly different with the distinguishing feature for video games being that they do not produce narratives without the active participation of the player. While recent video games like *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013) and *God of War* (SIE Santa Monica Studio, 2018) attempt to tell more complex stories than games of the past, the ludological argument remains the same: "If the player does not act, there will be no game, and therefore no session at all" (Frasca, 1999). While Frasca states his goal as "not to replace the narratologic approach, but to complement it," other scholars have used this logic to take a more hardline approach that games do not tell stories (Juul, 1999), or that they're better off when they abandon that ambition and leave narrative to film and novels (Bogost, 2017). While scholars who use narrative to analyze video games have typically utilized theories of literary studies (Murray, 1997), I center my approach to narrative through a communication lens.

## Narrative

Within the field of communication, Fisher (1984) proposes narrative as an alternative paradigm to understand human communication. In introducing narrative as an alternative paradigmatic lens, Fisher compares his proposal against what he refers to as the “rational world paradigm” (p. 3). Fisher describes the rational world paradigm as being grounded in an epistemology that privileges the scientific knowledge of experts as a legitimate source of knowledge and invalidates experiential knowledge as irrational and illogical. Fisher defines narrative as “symbolic action that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create, or interpret them” (p. 2). Fisher claims that narrative synthesizes two of rhetoric’s major themes: that of argumentative persuasion and of literary aesthetic. Palczewski, Ice, & Fritch (2016) further discuss the rhetorical function of narrative for its sense-making capacity in developing relationships between events over time. Through the development of these relationships, narratives give meaning to different phenomena which allows for their potential to construct a sense of identity and culture for both those who produce them and take them in. In their study of player narratives, Crawford and Gosling (2009) argue that games “facilitate the development of gamer narratives... [which] illustrates that video games, for many, are an important component of their everyday lives, narrative identities and social interactions” (p. 63).

Narrative is particularly useful as a resource for analyzing games for the fact that they are not singular, but numerous (Fisher, 1984). Fisher argues that narratives compete against one another to become the primary way we make sense of the world. Similarly expressing the multiple nature of narrative, McAdams (1997) seems to suggest that narratives can work in conjunction with one another to aid in our sense-making. In

defending their approach against their ludological critics, narrative games scholars argue that the examination of narratives is important for the way that narratives travel beyond the game (Crawford & Gosling, 2009). Jenkins (2004) claims that critics of narrative too often focus on the storyteller and do not put enough emphasis on how audiences comprehend and create their own narratives through play. Even when research focuses on a single game, narratives emerge from multiple locations: those created by the player; the story and narrative elements of the game; and the interweaving of those two which create unique narrative trajectories (Gee, 2006). For example, every player who completes *God of War* will have experienced the same story; however, the unique decisions that players make throughout their playthrough will have “enacted a different trajectory” (Gee, 2006, p. 60). The importance of these unique narrative trajectories, according to Gee, is that they are co-created by the player and the game designer. It is these stories to which players “attach their fantasies and desires” (p. 60).

### Ludonarrativity

The different trajectories that game narratives can take, as described by Gee (2006), demonstrates the importance of the relationship between game narratives and gameplay. Ludonarrativity refers to the intersection of a game’s ludic (controls, mechanics, interface, etc.) and narrative (story, characters, etc.) elements (Swain, 2010). First introduced in a review of the game *Bioshock* (2K Boston & 2K Australia, 2007), Hocking (2007) discusses how *Bioshock* suffers from ludonarrative dissonance. Ludonarrative dissonance occurs in video games when the ludic elements of the game and its narrative seem to be in opposition with one another. Seraphine (2016) describes ludonarrative dissonance as creating the sensation of “emersion,” the opposite of

immersion, where players feel a sensation of being taken out of game experience (p. 2). Hocking's review describes ludonarrative dissonance being experienced through the game granting players the freedom to kill or spare certain characters as it serves the protagonist's self-interest, while simultaneously restricting that freedom through its narrative. Ludonarrative consistency, considered the inverse of ludonarrative dissonance, is the immersion that happens when the ludic and narrative elements of a game align.

### Ludonarrative, Genre, and Masculinities

Analyzing the ways that the myriad narratives associated with video games are impacted by gameplay provides researchers with the capacity to see the resources for gendered sense-making that video games provide their players (Crawford & Gosling, 2009; Kagen, 2018; Lawlor, 2018); Lawlor's (2018) analysis of "essential paternal masculinity" in video games serves as one such example. In her research, Lawlor identifies a shift in the "damsel in distress" trope away from the traditionally romantic relationship between male and female characters. Where the trope once featured the masculine hero rescuing the feminine damsel and resulting in a romantic relationship for the two, games are now reframing the trope through a father-daughter relationship. By reframing the damsel in distress narrative through a paternal relationship, Lawlor argues that games valorize problematic masculine behavior. In using a young and innocent daughter figure that needs masculine protection, the excessively violent behavior of the father figures gets praised as morally honorable. Games like *Bioshock II* (2K Marin, 2010), *The Last of Us*, and *The Walking Dead: Season One* (Telltale Games and Skybound Games, 2012) ask its players to engage with and perform essential paternal masculinity through their ludonarratives. By asking players to engage with their



ludonarratives, games have the potential to normalize both problematic and healthy forms of masculinity alike.

The categorization of video games into particular genres opens up certain ludonarrative possibilities and restricts others. One area of interest to researchers is the way that certain genres get placed into a casual/hardcore dichotomy which informs an understanding of gameplay as either feminine or masculine (Hayes, 2007; Gilbert et al., 2018; Kagen, 2018; Ruberg, 2019). For example, “walking simulators” (Kagen, 2018; Ruberg, 2019) and survival horror (Kirkland, 2009; Monforton, 2016) are two genres that mechanically resemble one another, yet, their narrative differences lead to walking simulators being considered to feature feminine gameplay whereas gameplay in survival horror gets conceived of as masculine.

The “walking simulator” genre has been of particular interest to researchers for its subversion of typical hypermasculine gameplay (Kagen, 2018; Ruberg, 2019). Kagen describes hypermasculinity as an over-exaggerated hegemonic masculinity and is characterized within gaming by players total control over the game, something which walking simulators limit. Originally a derogatory label from hardcore gamers, walking simulators often position players in a state of passivity, limiting the possibility for players’ unique narrative trajectories. In this sense, it can be understood how game genre expands certain possibilities for gameplay and hinders others.

Like Lawlor’s (2018) work on essential paternal masculinity in video games Kagen (2018) and Kirkland (2009) both discuss the manifestation of masculinity in video games through their narrative and gameplay. Kagen analyzes *Firewatch*’s (Campo Santo, 2016) initial tease toward the normative, hegemonically masculine gaming experience as

described by Lawlor (2018), but ultimate emasculation of the player by its conclusion. Rather than providing the satisfaction of looming danger and catching the bad guy that the game teases, it pulls the rug out from under the player and forces an emotional reflection on the protagonist's past. The limited interaction afforded to the player in a walking simulator like *Firewatch* does not provide the same hypermasculine experience common to other video game genres. *Firewatch* arouses yet ultimately "disappoints" (i.e. emasculates) players seeking the hypermasculine experience. Instead, leaving them to do the ostensibly feminine, difficult emotional labor and therapeutic self-care of a care-oriented masculinity. In analyzing the male protagonists of the survival horror franchises, *Silent Hill* (Konami Computer Entertainment Tokyo, 1999), Kirkland (2009) discusses how ordinariness evokes both masculinity and femininity within Harry, James, and Henry. Through the course of each installment, *Silent Hill* position players into ostensibly masculine roles through their willingness to protect and fight enemies despite their lack of power, while concurrently establishing the characters' femininity through their fear and helplessness.

Kirkland's (2009) study of the *Silent Hill* franchise explains the implications that the intersection of narrative and gameplay has for players' sense-making of gender in video games. Critics of research analyzing gender representation of video game characters argue that the gender of the character is irrelevant to players, but that the control and functionality of the characters are more important (Aarseth, 2004; Newman, 2004). Princess Toadstool from *Super Mario Bros 2* serves as an example to support that claim; specifically, that her unique ability to float to areas that other characters could not reach makes her a desirable avatar (Newman, 2004). Kirkland (2009) questions this

notion, stating that it might be these characteristics which affect gameplay that may be gendered. Returning to the example of Princess Toadstool, Kirkland states:

[T]he choice of an avatar whose movements conform to qualities traditionally associated with femininity (grace, lightness, and delicacy) suggests that it is gameplay itself... that becomes feminized. The gendered video-game experience is not solely—or even primarily—as issue of visual representation but is expressed through game mechanics, structure, and goals, irrespective of or potentially working in opposition to character or avatar design. (p. 169)

In this sense, Kirkland (2009) agrees (to some extent) with Aarseth and Newman that an emphasis on avatars may be less telling about gender than the ways video games performatively elicit gender through narrative and gameplay.

Considering how genre opens up certain possibilities for ludonarrative and restricts others, when studying video games, choosing an appropriate game for analysis factors into determining the legitimacy of a researcher's claims. Research on how the sexist depictions of women in video games influences players in developing sexist beliefs sparked a debate between Gabbiadini, Riva, Andrighetto, Volpato, & Bushman (2016; 2017) and Ferguson & Donnellan (2017) due to the latter disagreeing with the former's choice of game for examination. The original article hypothesizes that increased exposure to sexist video games would lead to a decrease in empathy towards female victims of violence (Gabbiadini et al., 2016). Ferguson and Donnellan's reanalysis questions the usage of the *Grand Theft Auto* (Rockstar North, Digital Eclipse, & Rockstar Leeds, 1997) series as an exemplar of violent-sexist video games; while they acknowledge the presence

of violence and sexism in the series, they argue that using the series as an example is misguided for its “sandbox” nature.

“Sandbox” games, more commonly referred to as open-world games, provide players with extensive control over their in-game decisions which allows for players to create their own unique experiences in-game (Ferguson & Donnellan, 2017). The ways that sandbox and non-sandbox games should be differently analyzed has been of recent point of discussion by gaming news media (Peron, 2018; Robson, 2018) after a video titled “Red Dead Redemption 2 - Beating Up Annoying Feminist” surfaced online (Shirrako, 2018). Due to the freedom and control that players are granted, open-world games have been thought to be less narratively driven than non-open-world games, but this is not necessarily the case when considering the player’s role in constructing the innumerable narrative trajectories that are possible. Journalists discussing Shirrako’s video seemingly take two distinct positions: criticizing *Red Dead Redemption 2* (Rockstar Studios, 2018) for a display of toxic masculinity (Henrickson & Guggisberg, 2018); or arguing that “killing a suffragette in *Red Dead Redemption 2* says more about [the player] than Rockstar” (Kaser, 2018).

Lawlor’s (2018) research identifying essential paternal masculinity in *Bioshock II*, *The Last of Us*, and *The Walking Dead: Season One*, Kagen’s (2018) identification of *Firewatch*’s care-oriented masculinity, and Kirkland’s (2009) study of gender performance in the *Silent Hill* series demonstrate the diverse ways in which masculinities performatively emerge through gameplay and narrative. This makes video games a useful medium for researchers who seek a deeper understanding of the sense-making resources media provide for their consumers. This serves as my core research questions: how does

the *God of War* subreddit community utilize the myriad narratives related to *God of War*—personal, in-game narrative, ludonarrative—to understand masculinity? Marrying the emphasis on interactivity from the ludological perspective and the emphasis on sense-making from the narratological perspective allows for understanding the ways that players' in-game decisions shape personal narratives that travel beyond their relationship to *God of War* and its characters.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

### **Interpretivism**

Interpretivism is a methodological paradigm of research which focuses on varied, subjective interpretations and perceptions of a socially constructed reality (Schwandt, 2000) Researchers who embrace the interpretivist paradigm seek to understand the social construction of meaning through the data they collect. In emphasizing subjective interpretations, interpretivism rejects empiricism, the notion that knowledge stems from that which can be directly observed through our primary senses. Along with its rejection of empiricism, the interpretivist paradigm believes that all researchers, including those who espouse objectivity, influence their research with their own biases.

With its focus on a socially constructed reality, interpretivist scholars support the notion that there is no one reality, but many realities which are “accomplished between human beings through symbolic practices of expression and interpretation” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 8). For researchers to successfully understand symbolic practices, they first need to understand how those practices are shaped by particular meanings (Schwandt, 2000). Building upon this notion, Schwandt states, “To say that human action is meaningful is to claim either that it has a certain intentional content that indicates the kind of action it is and/or that what an action means can be grasped only in terms of the system of meanings to which it belongs” (p. 191). According to Lindlof and Taylor (2011), for researchers to produce a credible understanding of the reality they are studying, “intimate familiarity is considered a requirement for successful explanation” (p.

9). One way that interpretivist researchers have attempted to understand the realities they're researching is through achieving *verstehen*.

*Verstehen*, or an empathic understanding of reality from the participants' worldview, has been stated as a goal of interpretivist research for its encouragement of empathic identification with the research participants (Schwandt, 2000). Colloquially understood as putting yourself into the shoes of another, the concept of *verstehen* was introduced to the social sciences by German sociologist Max Weber. Interpretivist research values *verstehen* because it emphasizes an understanding of the subjective construction of meaning from the position of those being researched. In short, an adherence to *verstehen* necessitates that interpretivist researchers accurately depict how individuals make sense of their realities.

### **Ethnography**

As stated by Schwandt (2000), "social inquiry is a distinctive praxis, a kind of activity that in the doing transforms the very theory and aims that guide it" (p. 190). In other words, as we ask certain questions to understand some phenomenon, we find that some research methods are better suited than others for finding answers. In its most basic form, Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) define ethnographic research as involving:

...the ethnographer participating, overtly or covertly in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions — in fact, collecting what data are available to throw light on the issues that are the focus of the research. (p. 1)

While Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) present one understanding of ethnography, other scholars contend the notion that any one definition could fully

encompass the range of ethnography (Rachel, 1998; Stewart, 1998). Rather than attempting to establish an essential definition of ethnography, Stewart (1998, p. 6-7) proposes four widely accepted characteristics—participant observation, holism, context sensitivity, and sociocultural description—that, in combination, shape ethnography.

Participant observation, the first of Stewart's characteristics, reflects Hammersley and Atkinson's (1995) definition of the up-close engagement of the researcher in the daily life of the setting they're studying. Through immersing themselves in the field—the space of the ethnographic study—ethnographers seek to understand the construction of meaningful symbolic practices by the members of the culture they're studying. Having been described as a dialectic of involvement or detachment with their participants (Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2007), the positionality as cultural insider or outsider plays an epistemological role for the researcher (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). For those researchers who are familiar with their field, their familiarity may provide them with potentially greater access to information as compared to outsiders. However, researchers who are more detached from their field may benefit from potential discomfort and uncertainty; by abandoning comfort and certainty, researchers who are cultural outsiders have a perspective on the culture that provides the potential to unravel the web of cultural sense-making within which insiders are entangled.

Fieldwork, the process of conducting research in the field (Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2007), is an important characteristic of ethnography for its generative potential in shaping the reality of the research topic (Hastrup, 1992). As the connecting force between the ethnographer's experience and their topic of research, an ethnographer's fieldwork shapes their understanding of the topic. While researchers may attempt to achieve



*verstehen* in their research, their personal assumptions and biases inevitably influence how they write about their field. Ultimately, the final product—the written ethnography—generates an understanding of that phenomenon for their readers.

The concept of holism reflects the ethnographer's construction of a connected understanding of the culture they're studying through the synthesis of their observations (Thornton, 1988). This is the “core meaning of holism for anthropology, [that] culture is an integrated whole and that individuals can only be understood within the context of that whole” (Johnson & Johnson, 1990, p. 167). This ties into the importance of a researcher's immersion into their field. Those who are immersed in their fields will see the interconnectedness of their observations while those who are not may struggle to identify those connections, thus making their observations seem insignificant or unimportant.

Building from the first two characteristics of participant observation and holism, Stewart proposes a third characteristic: context sensitivity. The characteristic of context sensitivity indicates the ethnographer's recognition that their fieldwork is specific to that particular setting. Adhering to context sensitivity encourages the ethnographer to reject hegemonic sense-making strategies when analyzing those of their field. Stewart's fourth characteristic, sociocultural description, is evident when an ethnographer attempts to thoroughly describe the field and phenomena that they have studied. An ethnographer's intimate familiarity with the field, as stated by Lindlof and Taylor (2011), may aid in satisfying this characteristic. Other ethnographers support the notion that serious participation in the field “transforms the ethnographer from spectator to seer” (Stoller, 1984, p. 94) and transforms their “knowledge from observation to insight” (Hastrup, 1992, p. 118). These two transformations aid in the ethnographer achieving both

veracity—conformity to truth—and perspicacity—applicable insight—in their claims; both of which are recognized as goals of ethnography (Stewart, 1998).

An emphasis on veracity—conformity to truth—is beneficial, if not necessary, to ethnography if it seeks to elucidate the phenomena being researched as Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) claim. As stated by Geertz (1973), “behavior must be attended to, and with some exactness, because it is through the flow of behavior—or, more precisely, social action—that cultural forms find articulation (p. 17). Put simply, emphasizing the veracity of their claims allows for ethnographers to better see (and explain to their readers) the interconnected forces which construct the reality of those being studied.

While ethnographers cannot and should not attempt to generalize the findings of their research, they should strive to have their claims be perspicacious (Stewart, 1998). Along with veracity, perspicacity benefits ethnography for the way it provides ethnographers with the ability to extend applicable insights to other domains. Even in recognizing the contextual specificity of their data, perspicacious insight allows for cultural specificities to provide explanation for other cultural sense-making patterns. To successfully do this, Stewart identifies two challenges to overcome: first, the researcher must develop an insight; second, they must show how this insight can be applied to other cultural contexts.

### Culture

In seeking to understand culture, ethnographers “describe and interpret the observable relationships between social practices and systems of meaning” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 134). Potentially going beyond the nation-state conceptualization of culture, Geertz (1973) describes culture as human-created “webs of significance” in

which humans are entangled (p. 5); similarly, Hall (1976) describes culture as an extension of the mind. By extension, Hall refers to those tools used speed up the evolution process. As an example, he discusses how a knife does a better job of cutting than our teeth; however, through interrogating the functions of extensions, we recognize where they fall short: knives are much worse at chewing than teeth. As such, culture organizes our navigation of the world. As an extension of the mind, culture directs the way that we think about the world. In certain cultural settings, certain thoughts/actions are possible, while others are inconceivable. However, in a different cultural setting, those same thoughts and actions that were once inconceivable may not only become possible, but they may become the norm.

The strength of ethnography as a research method is most evident when seeking to answer questions about culture (Boellstorff, 2006). To uncover and understand cultural sense-making, ethnographers use some combination of participant observation, active participation in community activities, surveys, interviews, and analysis of cultural texts (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Another research tactic that ethnographers utilize to establish veracity and perspicacity is thick description—the researcher’s thoroughly detailed account of culturally-specific knowledge and behaviors (Geertz, 1973). Geertz argues that thick description fulfills the objective of ethnography, which he describes as determining the “stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in terms of which [phenomena] are produced, perceived, and interpreted, and without which they would not in fact exist” (p. 7). In other words, through thick description, the cultural webs of meaning are disentangled and made clear.

Over time, culture has been defined in myriad ways by those who study it (Moon, 1996). In her genealogy of intercultural communication, Moon uncovers the implications related to the ways in which culture has been conceptualized. Her findings suggest that the field's conceptualizations of culture shaped the ways in which culture was studied. Moon's piece is important for how it illuminates methodological assumptions about culture. Moon's genealogy doesn't just tell us that our conception of culture informs the way that culture is researched, but it illuminates for us that our conception of culture informs the way that we are *able* to research culture. Considering how our social inquiries influence our theoretical and methodological undertakings (Schwandt, 2000), we can see how limiting the scope of culture limits how it can be studied. Thus, by broadening the scope of what culture can be, we simultaneously broaden the ways that culture can be researched.

As a response to the growing subfields of linguistics (ethnolinguistics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, etc.), Hymes (1964) developed an ethnography of communication—originally referred to as an ethnography of speaking (Hymes, 1962)—which “investigates directly the use of language in contexts of situation so as to discern patterns proper to speech activity, patterns which escape separate studies” (Hymes, 1964, p. 2-3). In combining the anthropological approach to ethnography with the study of communication, ethnographies of communication (EOC) focus on the “shared meanings and coordinated social actions which vary across social groups” (Philipsen, 1989, p. 258). Hymes said this approach should use the patterns of communication of the communities they are studying for context rather than generalized rules. By centering the communication patterns of the research community, ethnographers of communication are

better suited to achieving veracity in their claims through discovering how community members make sense of their reality.

### Virtual Ethnography

Virtual ethnography utilizes the methodology of ethnography and applies it to virtual spaces on the Internet (Hine, 2000). In her book, *Virtual Ethnography*, Christine Hine argues that the Internet can be viewed in two distinct ways: as a culture and as a cultural artifact. Hine's (2000) first view of the Internet recognizes it as a space "where culture is formed and reformed" (p. 9). Her second view, the Internet as a cultural artifact, recognizes it as a product of culture and that through our use of the Internet, we give it certain meanings (Hine, 2000). Insofar as the Internet is understood both as culture and cultural artifact, ethnography has been embraced as an exceptional method for researching it. Channeling Hall (1976) allows for the consideration of the Internet as an extension—specifically, as an extension of our presence. Considering how extensions speed up the evolutionary process, the Internet extends its users' presence by allowing them to participate in discussions with other users while separated by potentially long distances. Without this extension, people would be limited to participating in discussions where they could only be physically present. In this sense, the Internet simultaneously functions as both a culture and cultural artifact: certain meaning and significance is given to the Internet through the way it extends the user's presence, which in turn establishes the Internet as a space where these discussions form and reform culture. In studying the Internet ethnographically, Hine (2000) addresses three critical elements that should be addressed: "the role of travel and face-to-face interaction in ethnography; text, technology, and reflexivity; and the making of an ethnographic object (p. 43).

The role of face-to-face interaction in ethnography traditionally involved researchers travelling to a location and immersing themselves into a particular level of culture, allowing them to obtain rich data. The immersion of the ethnographer plays a rhetorical role in convincing their readers about the veracity and perspicacity of their claims (Hine, 2000). Without a location to which they can travel and without the ability to interact with community members face-to-face, ethnographers of virtual spaces must reframe virtual interactions to establish veracity and perspicacity; highlighting the connection between members of virtual communities is one strategy that researchers have utilized to establish those qualities.

In her book “Communities at Play,” Celia Pearce (2009) follows the “Uru Diaspora”—a virtual community of *Uru* players who emigrated to other virtual worlds after their game closed. Pearce highlights the structure of *Uru*, a massively multiplayer online game (MMOG) centered around cooperative puzzle solving, as creating a unique community that differed from other more popular MMOGs like *World of Warcraft* which centers player combat. Pearce identifies shared values as playing a key role in group cohesion: “When asked about what held the group together, the vast majority of TGU [The Gathering of Uru] members said, ‘shared values’” (Pearce, 2009, p. 134). Pearce emphasizes TGU members’ values as strengthening the group’s cohesion. Because TGU’s structure differs from other MMOGs, by explaining how TGU specifically makes sense of this cohesion, Pearce’s claims exhibit veracity.

With virtual interactions typically lacking the face-to-face component of traditional ethnography, Hine frames the communication that happens in virtual spaces as texts. As texts, the communication that happens in virtual spaces attains a characteristic

of mobility, meaning that texts are “available outside the immediate circumstances in which they are produced” (Hine, 2000, p. 50). This mobility of communication in virtual spaces must bring forth a conversation regarding ethnographic temporality. Considering the influential role of participant observation, ethnography has traditionally included researchers engaging with community events or communicative acts as they happen (Hine, 2000); however, the question arises: when do mobile communication acts happen? Due to the mobile nature of virtual communication, Hine argues for ethnographers to “interpret them as culturally situated cultural artefacts” (p. 51). Analyzing mobile communication as culturally situated texts allows for the ethnographer to have a glimpse of how the text’s author(s) understood their world at the time of its production. The analysis of texts must take into consideration the context in which they are created (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Thompson, 1995); a lack of contextual consideration exacerbates the gap between the production and reception of mobile texts—bridging that gap becomes the goal of the virtual ethnographer (Kendall, 2002). Only in considering their context is virtual ethnography able to “determine [texts’] status as accounts of reality” and reclaim the veracity which traditional ethnography seeks (Hine, 2000, p. 52).

Understanding the context of virtual texts illuminates the crux of Hine’s claim about studying the Internet ethnographically: that it is both a culture and cultural artifact. This duality exemplifies particular cultural groups’ usage of the Internet. The Internet operates as a culture in that it creates and fosters connections between individuals to establish virtual communities. The Internet operates as a cultural artifact when considering how cultural communities use the Internet (Hine, 2000). Using gaming culture as an example, the Internet functions as a cultural artifact when websites like

Reddit, Twitch, and Steam provide opportunities for people to talk about video games, watch video games, and play video games. When communities establish shared meanings behind their usage, the Internet forms gaming culture. This explains Hine's argument that virtual ethnographers must consider the potentialities of Internet as both culture and culture artifact during analysis— "The meaningfulness of the technology does not exist before the uses themselves, but is worked out at the time of use" (p. 29). Put simply, in considering the Internet's functionality as both a culture and cultural artifact simultaneously, we identify how cultural usage of the Internet shapes a space for the cultivation of that culture.

### ***God of War Subreddit***

In this study, I use virtual ethnography to examine how gaming culture comes to understand masculinity through their construction and utilization of narratives associated with video games. The *God of War* subreddit serves as the field for this virtual ethnography with the subreddit's threads serving as the primary data source. The large community and consistent participation of its members makes the *God of War* subreddit an exceptional field for this ethnography. As of May 14, 2020, the *God of War* subreddit has 120,060 subscribers. The subreddit functions as both culture and cultural artifact in that it represents a fraction of a larger gaming culture, while simultaneously functioning as a culture in itself where fans gather to discuss the series with one another.

The ways that Reddit elicits what Ruggill, McAllister, and Menchaca (2004) refer to as "gamework" make it beneficial for analyzing gaming culture. Ruggill, McAllister, and Menchaca argue for a paradigmatic approach to games studies that emphasizes the immense amount of work that goes into the development and playing of computer games.



In adapting Kuntzel's (1978) "film-work," the trio urge that "transforming [games] into works illuminates their signifying practices" (Ruggill et al., 2004, p. 298). The purpose of this paradigm, they argue, is to reveal the "artificiality" of games. By this, they mean that computer games are products and producers of culture, not simply narratological and ludological experiences.

In doing this research, I found that the curation of content by the *God of War* subreddit community demonstrates *God of War's* (2018) potential as a producer of culture. Reddit utilizes community curation as its default method for determining which posts get promoted as the top threads and which get relegated to subsequent pages. In a demonstration of community cohesion, curation happens through members upvoting content they like and downvoting content they dislike. While users have the option of sorting threads in a way that disregards up/downvotes, Reddit's default sorting form, "Hot," promotes the most recent, most upvoted posts which allows for users to participate in the most popular conversations at that time. Content that has been curated by a specific community makes subreddits exceptional fields for virtual ethnographies. Highly upvoted threads on subreddits highlight the cohesion of communities in a way that demonstrates Hall's (1976) notion of culture as an extension of the mind in that attention gets directed towards certain threads and away from others.

In addition to threads being curated through up/downvotes, comments within threads are subject to the same treatment further demonstrating Hall's extension of the mind. Similar to threads, as members upvote comments, they move to the top of the page and are the first responses that readers will see whereas downvoted comments move to the bottom. However, while a thread's score will not show a number below zero,

comments can receive negative scores. In their account preferences, users can hide comments below a certain score. For example, my account is set to hide comments if they have a score of negative-5 or below<sup>4</sup>; hidden comments are still available for users to view but they must be manually opened. While I read through threads in their entirety, to avoid presenting one-off comments as representative of the entire community and to maintain veracity, most posts and comments that I quote were those that were highly upvoted. However, I do discuss some downvoted threads with scores of zero and heavily downvoted comments to demonstrate the community's cohesive rejection of certain beliefs and perspectives.

#### Data Collection & Analysis

For this study, I limit the timeframe for threads from the present day back to June 13, 2016—the date of Sony's first official announcement for *God of War* (2018). Instead of *God of War's* (2018) release date, going back to the first official announcement offers a look at the narratives that players constructed in anticipation of Kratos's return after six years. Reddit's timestamping of posts allows for an adherence to Hine's (2000) suggestion for texts to be interpreted as “culturally situated.” The timestamping posts and comments strengthens the ability to consider the temporal context of these posts which supports a similar understanding of these texts that the author(s) had in their creation of them.

My data collection process utilizes Reddit's search function to search for specific terms that members use in their posts. In discussing Reddit's search function, my

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<sup>4</sup> To be completely honest, I don't ever remember setting this threshold. I'm thinking this is Reddit's default setting.

committee members were quick to caution me against relying too heavily on my initial searches for analysis; rather than achieving *verstehen*, my initial searches were susceptible to privileging my own worldview and assumptions over those of community members. Considering their cautioning, while the posts gathered from my initial search terms contained some useful information for analysis, they were mostly used to increase my understanding of the language community members used when referring to topics like masculinity, father-son relationships, and narrative. Community members' commonly used language served as a second round of search terms ("cycle," "prophecy," "emotion," "monster," "accountability," etc.).

The second round of searches benefitted this research by diminishing the limitations of the search function. Perhaps obviously, only threads that contain the searched term appear in the results. Using community-specific language provided the opportunity to gather additional threads where masculinity and narrative were implied, but those specific terms were not explicitly used. Rather than privileging my own reading of *God of War's* (2018) ludonarrative, my second round of searches were effective for understanding how *God of War* subreddit community members used the ludonarrative as a resource to make sense of masculinity. In total, these two rounds of searches resulted in the collection of over 70 threads for analysis.

One benefit of using Reddit as a field for ethnographic research is the convenience of threads being transcribed and textualized; these threads serve as this research's data. Based on Hine's (2000) suggestion for virtual ethnographers to consider virtual communication as texts, I engage in a textual analysis of *God of War* subreddit threads that construct narratives about Kratos's masculinity. Specifically, I explain the

*God of War* subreddit community's construction of three micro-narratives that support and defend a macro narrative of Kratos's rebirth in the face of criticism from journalists.

With community interaction already being transcribed and textualized on Reddit, the consideration of these threads as cultural texts made turning them into ethnographic objects for analysis come with relative ease. Threads were collected into a spreadsheet that allowed for the inclusion of pertinent information such as: the search term used to find the thread; major ideas within the thread; top comments (number of upvotes); and the thread's upvote percentage. This research includes a threefold categorization and coding process: First, threads were categorized in their entirety by the search term used to find them. Second, through compiling threads in a spreadsheet, interconnected recurring themes emerged within the threads' contents that appeared to inform the community's strategies for demonstrating Kratos's growth since the Greek arc and defending his masculinity against critique. Using spreadsheets as a data management tool was advantageous as it allowed for an entire column to be devoted to personal notes and asides describing threads' interconnectedness. These asides eventually served as the inspiration for more conceptual memo writing in a notebook. Using spreadsheets and notebooks created two separate, yet intimately intertwined spaces for a final emic categorization of three community micro narratives ("Disparaging His Past;" "Affirming His Struggle;" and "Acknowledging His Embrace") that support the macro narrative of rebirth through "being better."

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

### **The Redemption of Kratos**

In *Raising Kratos*, a documentary centered around the production of *God of War* (2018) (Akiaten, 2019), Cory Barlog, the game's creative director, identifies and discusses the mental journey that Kratos goes through over the course of the game. Barlog discusses the game as both a traditional and nontraditional "coming of age" story. In the sense that *God of War* (2018) is a traditional coming of age story, he emphasizes the changes that Atreus endures and his growth that stems from losing his mother. However, as an untraditional coming of age story, Barlog focuses on the development and growth of Kratos. Like Atreus, Kratos endures numerous changes after Faye's death, one being that he must take a more involved role as Atreus's father. Barlog refers to this game as a coming of age for Kratos because in spending time with Atreus, Kratos learns "how to be a human" (Akiaten, 2019). According to Barlog, part of Kratos learning how to "be a human" required the developers to address the displays of toxic masculinity that were central to his character in the franchise's previous installments.

While *God of War* (2018) was praised as a resounding success for its exploration of masculinity and growth, it also faced its fair share of skepticism and pointed critique regarding Kratos's masculinity (Conway, 2019; Lacina, 2018A, 2018B; Muncy, 2018). In her review of *God of War* (2018) for Wired, Julie Muncy (2018) calls Kratos "a bad man... a womanizing, cruel, monstrous hero." For Muncy, the premise of the 2018 release centers around "whether or not [the player] can be made to sympathize with a

man like Kratos.” She identifies masculinity as being a fascination of the game’s development team, stating the franchise’s centering of violence as the core of Kratos’s masculinity. Muncy calls this a point of struggle for Kratos: how can he teach his son to survive the harsh, violent world without teaching Atreus to be violent? How can he teach Atreus to be better while simultaneously running the risk that Atreus becomes the monster he once was? In her *Deorbital* piece, Lacina (2018B) critiques the depiction of Kratos’s masculinity in *God of War* (2018) and the developers’ goal for him and Atreus to be better. She argues that this rendition of Kratos remains the same guarded man who only operates at the emotional poles of rage and stoicism: “Kratos screams, because it’s all he has. He is silent, because it’s all he’s allowed.” She claims that his screams and silence demonstrate his inability to “mature past the toxic masculinity of his past,” and with that, his inability to teach Atreus what it means to be better.

While Muncy’s and Lacina’s articles were defended by some on the *God of War* subreddit, most comments were scornful. User Cord87 complains that Lacina seems “clouded by their anti-patriarchal views that they don’t see the harsh truths and lessons of the story/era.” Cord87 proceeds to describe Kratos’s harshness as being shaped by the harsh world in which he lives, claiming that Kratos did not want to teach Atreus certain traits, but that it was necessary after being forced onto this journey. When defending Kratos’s actions and masculinity against criticism, most posts on the subreddit claim that critics missed the point of the story (i.e. being better). I identify three narratives that the subreddit community construct that emphasize Kratos’s redemption: disparaging his past, affirming his struggle, and acknowledging his embrace.

### **Disparaging His Past: Reflections of a Monster**

The first strategy that *God of War* subreddit members use to defend Kratos is their acknowledgment that he was not a good person during the Greek arc. Reflecting upon the past as a means to understand the present can be a healthy practice to see one's growth in life. Acting in line with Kratos, whose reflection on his monstrous past reveals his remorse, members of the *God of War* subreddit frequently reference and disparage aspects of Kratos's past to justify his redemption. By acknowledging his problematic actions and positioning him as a bad person during the Greek arc, subreddit members establish Kratos's growth when highlighting moments in *God of War* (2018) of his mortification over the things he did in the past. They do this in two ways: by criticizing Kratos as a one-dimensional character in the Greek arc and by deriding users who long for that Kratos to return.

#### “New Kratos Wouldn't Make Sense without Good Ol' Annoying Kratos”

One way that *God of War* subreddit members attempt to prove Kratos's growth since the Greek arc is by disparaging Kratos's past. By critiquing his lack of emotional depth throughout the Greek arc where vengeance against the gods served as his sole motivator, community members deride Kratos's one-dimensionality; jarrettmar says, “Old Kratos was badass but there was no emotion and no connection to the characters. Everyone saw Kratos as a grouchy, always angry one-dimensional character.” In a meme posted to the subreddit, LightSpawn jokes about Atreus finding it absurd when he discovers that a dead character was killed by his son. The post's sarcastic title, “Kratos wouldn't know anything about that,” teases the absurdity and monstrosity that killing one's father elicits. Other users in the thread add to the joke by highlighting that Zeus is

not the only family member who Kratos kills in the Greek arc, but that the list is quite extensive: his grandfather (Cronos), half-brothers (Ares, Hercules, Hephaestus, Perseus), half-sisters (Athena, Persephone), uncles (Hades, Poseidon), and aunt (Hera).

Considering that at the time of these murders Kratos only shows any semblance of remorse for two (Athena and Hephaestus), subreddit members seem to have zero qualms about labelling young Kratos as a monster. However, through the labelling of Greek arc Kratos as a monster, members open up a space for discussion where his reflexivity in *God of War* (2018) operates as a demonstration of Kratos's character depth.

Kratos's reflection on his past actions serves as one of *God of War's* (2018) significant departures from the Greek arc. This departure was a prominent site of discussion because it showed a remorseful side of Kratos that players had rarely seen before. When speaking of his past, Kratos tells Atreus, "I killed many who were deserving... and many who were not." On the subreddit, Athena and Hephaestus were discussed as clearly being the undeserving who Kratos references. Yet, others who were undeserving are also pondered, even Zeus. Serving as the main antagonist across the Greek arc, fighting and murdering Zeus is the final thing players do in *God of War III* (SCE Santa Monica Studio, 2010). As Musicfactor identifies, Zeus was the source of almost every negative event in Kratos's life, stating: "Zeus brought his Death on himself because of his fear of Kratos, and quite frankly deserved to die." Similarly, PabloKingOfNowhere and others interrogate why Kratos seems to be remorseful or regret killing the one who inflicted so much hurt upon him. Just as Helheim tortures Atreus with a vision of himself killing Móði, it tortures Kratos with visions of Zeus. PabloKingofNowhere discusses Kratos's visions in Helheim as being significant because



they had rarely ever seen Kratos so defeated and ashamed. They present Kratos's feelings of shame as being seemingly logical: "Ultimately, [Kratos] got his revenge and killed everyone in its path. Now, without the rage there's only remorse." The suggestion that Kratos could be reasonably interpreted by members of the subreddit as experiencing regret over his actions in the Greek arc, let alone killing Zeus, a character who many in the community feel deserved to die at Kratos's hand, clearly illuminates his growth for community members.

#### A "Soft" Masculinity Requires "Hard" Work

While the reflective departure for *God of War* (2018) earned high praise from many, some users mourn Kratos for becoming "soft" and yearn for a return of the violent Kratos who eviscerated the Greek pantheon. In two posts, user SheWhoHates complains about the direction of *God of War* (2018). While SheWhoHates believes that *God of War* (2018) is a good game overall, they feel the developers' attempt to mature Kratos is "spineless" political correctness. Like Cord87, SheWhoHates feels that other subreddit members and the developers are ignoring the game's harsh setting and claims that others are "projecting modern sensitivities" by conflating masculine maturity and development with femininity. SheWhoHates states, "Character development does not need pussification [sic]. [The old Kratos] wasn't shallow, he was just brutal." In addition to demonstrating the maturation of the franchise through praising Kratos's emotional development since the Greek arc, users also prove their own maturation through disparaging others who yearn for Kratos to return to his "old self."

SheWhoHates's posts were met with strong resistance from other fans in the community. Comments that disparaged Kratos's past not only served as evidence of his

maturation, but also functioned to show the maturation of *God of War* players. Many of the comments that disparaged Kratos's actions in the previous games disregarded SheWhoHates's comments as being "edgy," a term commonly used to degrade dispositions that glorify phenomena that would traditionally be considered dark. Specifically, SheWhoHates's disappointment with *God of War* (2018) being "gore-lite" and its omission of "brutal, visceral animations" was derided as being edgy. The highest voted comment responding to one of SheWhoHates's posts states:

Nah man [to be honest] that shit got old pretty quick, like don't get me wrong the games were great for playing when angry but [right now] the main focus is storytelling and creating a good narrative. The old [*God of War*] games, while I loved them, were just over the top to appeal to the edgelords. (ks1ngh)

ks1ngh's comment exemplifies the shift that Cory Barlog's desired for the *God of War* franchise: allowing Kratos (and the players) to experience something beyond anger. When asked by SheWhoHates if they felt that *God of War's* (2018) shift made Kratos softer, Jazz\_the\_Goose not only disagreed, but seems to feel that Kratos is stronger than ever:

No. I think he became more conscious of himself and the more evil aspects of his nature, and wants to be better for his son's sake. This doesn't equate to being "softer". That's confronting your demons, and that takes more fucking guts than any gratuitously violent act. (Jazz\_the\_Goose)

Comments like ks1ngh's and Jazz\_the\_Goose's do a few things: First, they both openly scorn the notion that *God of War* (2018) depicts a weaker, softer Kratos or that the franchise has taken a step backwards since the Greek arc. Second, they serve as a call to

action for players of the *God of War* franchise that, like for Kratos, the time has come to mature beyond “edgy” content. To members of the *God of War* subreddit, doing the hard work of reflecting on the past to “confront your demons” illustrates an effort to be better in the future and as seemingly suggested by members, intention can be more important than results. Finally, their comments illustrate the ways that the ludic or gameplay experiences of video games are informed by the game’s narrative elements. The gameplay of *God of War* (2018) does not drastically differ from the franchise’s previous installments: the game still features overt violence and combat alongside areas for exploration. However, the shift in Kratos’s narrative from rage to reflexivity explains the new understandings that ks1ngh, Jazz\_the\_Goose, and even SheWho Hates have of Kratos in *God of War* (2018).

### **Affirming His Struggle: A Rebellion against Prophecy**

The second strategy *God of War* subreddit members use to demonstrate Kratos’s redemption is by displacing his guilt over his past actions through blaming prophecy. By the end of *God of War* (2018), the game reveals to the player that Faye, Kratos’s wife and Atreus’s mother, harbored the power of prophetic foresight. In one of the game’s final cutscenes, just before the player fulfills Faye’s wish of spreading her ashes, a mural detailing numerous events in Kratos and Atreus’s journey is unveiled. On the subreddit, players utilize Faye’s foresight to argue that Kratos’s problematic actions are not of his own accord but have been predetermined by prophecy. When affirming Kratos’s struggle against different prophecies, community members employ two approaches: they privilege the intention of his actions rather than their results and they emphasize prophecy as being an unrelenting force requiring tremendous effort to overcome.

### The Road to Helheim is Paved with Good Intentions

One way that *God of War* subreddit members use to emphasize Kratos's struggle against prophecy is by privileging the intention of his actions rather than the result of his actions. By focusing on the intention of Kratos's actions rather than their results, fans on the subreddit disregard any potential negative impact that he has on others and emphasize his effort to be better. Many members feel that focusing on the results of his actions, rather than the intention behind them, leads to a distorted understanding of who Kratos is and who he strives to be. The reason for this feeling being that Kratos may have little to no power over his actions' outcome when prophecy predetermined it eons ago. In this sense, users absolve Kratos by scapegoating prophecy for the result of his actions.

In response to critiques of Kratos's problematic actions, subreddit members identify multiple prophecies as "forcing" Kratos to act in certain ways. Heliosvector and other commenters construct Kratos as being destined by fate to act in ways that harmful to others and himself: "It's not so much that Kratos kills for the sake of killing because he's an evil person... he's someone who can't learn from his mistakes... He is absolutely a toxic person, but because of brashness, not malice." Kratos's hellbent fixation on achieving vengeance against the Greek pantheon elicits this brashness; a characteristic he strives to purge from his son in the new game.

The brash, impulsive nature that subreddit members identify within Kratos during the Greek arc is similarly identified by Kratos within Atreus. One prophecy discussed in the subreddit that demonstrates Kratos and Atreus's shared brashness is the cycle of sons killing or overthrowing their fathers. Continued by Kratos after killing Zeus, community members tease Kratos about his newfound investment in breaking the cycle of parricide.

Nonetheless, their discussion of his remorse for his actions during the Greek arc allows for this investment to be discussed seriously. Originally stated by Zeus when he attempts to kill Kratos in *God of War II* (SCE Santa Monica Studio, 2007), Kratos repeats the quote, “The cycle ends here,” when he stops Baldur from killing Freya, Baldur’s mother.

In claiming that he’s breaking the cycle by killing Baldur, madpepper24 and Yosho2k speculate whether killing another can legitimately break a cycle of vengeance or if it simply displaces vengeance onto another, in this case Freya. Beyond simply being an attempt by Kratos to stop another child from killing their parent, madpepper24 asks if the cycle could also represent “gods being selfish, careless and doing whatever they want just because they can?” Many seem to disagree, thinking that the cycle simply represents parricide. Yosho2k agrees that parricide is a noteworthy element of the cycle, but that it runs deeper; he provides a thorough interpretation of Kratos’s intention behind killing Baldur:

Kratos gave Baldur many many chances during the times when he had a choice between killing his mother and how he ended it... He also understood Baldur, being unable to escape the rage of his parents' crimes against him, but he knew that it was necessary to break the cycle of patricide [sic] he identified in Baldur. He feared Atreus would end up falling into that cycle... At that point, there was no real malice in killing Baldur. Kratos accepted the Baldur's life would only lead through a river of pain, misery, suffering, and murder. At that point, Kratos decided to make killing Baldur a sacrificial act to defend Freya and end Baldur's path towards becoming another Kratos. (Yosho2k)

Yosho2k's post exceptionally demonstrates that while the result of Kratos's actions may be unfavorable, his intentions promote his virtue. Even for users who do critique the results of his actions, they recognize the righteousness of his intentions. For example, while some users contest whether Kratos truly expresses remorse for killing his father, there seems to be unanimous agreement among members that setting Atreus down a better path serves as the primary motivator behind Kratos's actions. Users interpret Kratos's actions assuming this motivation guides him in his attempt to be a role model for his son. Tartarus216 and hizinberg interpret Kratos's "remorse" as not for killing Zeus, but instead as a fear that Atreus will become like Kratos by "letting rage control him as opposed to him being able to control his rage;" according to Tartarus216, this "life in anguish" is the fate and the curse of being a god.

#### The Force that Fights Back and The Herculean (Or Better Yet, Kratos-ean) Effort

Fans' utilization of prophecy that describes Kratos as being forced to act in certain ways serves as a point of intrigue regarding the typical gendered constructions of masculinity as active and femininity as passive. To think that Kratos, the pinnacle of masculine dominance to those on the *God of War* subreddit, would yield to anything is unthinkable. Prophecy must be crafted as a powerful force that requires a Herculean effort for one to fight against and overcome (considering that Kratos killed Hercules in *God of War III* (2010), he should stand a chance). However, *God of War II* (2007) established the precedent for Kratos's ability to defy fate when he killed the Sisters of Fate to return himself to a time before Zeus's betrayal.

In addition to *God of War II* (2007) where Kratos successfully alters fate, *God of War* (2018) suggests that Kratos alters fate once again. In Norse mythology, Baldur's

death initiates Ragnarök, a series of events resulting in the end and eventual rebirth of the world. After returning from spreading Faye's ashes, Mimir informs Kratos that Fimbulwinter, a long winter that spans the length of three summers and Ragnarök's beginning, has commenced. Kratos grumbles at the thought of enduring another prophecy, but Mimir tells him that this is different, "Prophecy doesn't expect this for a hundred more winters at least. You've changed something." The recognition from both Mimir and community members of Kratos's uncanny ability to not just combat prophecy, but alter it, further exemplifies the tremendous effort that he puts forth to establish a better path for himself and his son.

While constructed by subreddit members as Kratos acting nobly, members believe that by actively fighting against fate he invites self-fulfilling prophecy as a possibility into his life. A now deleted account describes self-fulfilling prophecy in mythology as "You learn of the fates and by trying to escape your fate you end up creating the outcome you tried to avoid." The final panel in Faye's mural, seen only by Kratos, depicts an immobilized and presumably dead Kratos in the arms of Atreus. Another deleted account reminds the thread that Kratos comes from a line of sons who usurped their fathers—Kratos killed Zeus, Zeus overthrew Cronos, and Cronos deposed Ouranos. This commenter initially uses this logic to defend Kratos's early hesitation to reveal his past to Atreus as he must contend with the possibility that Atreus may one day do the same to him. However, all those fathers kept their sons at a distance and forged resentment within them, ultimately leading to their sons besting them and fulfilling prophecy. Regarding his experience with the Sisters of Fate in *God of War II* (2007), another user argues that rather than trying to escape his fate in the past, Kratos has defied fate by facing it head

on. They feel that in revealing his past to Atreus, Kratos once again faces prophecy and demonstrates his learning and growth from his mistakes and the mistakes made by those who came before him, potentially allowing him to avoid the fate that Faye depicts in her final panel.

### **Acknowledging His Embrace: The Process of Fatherhood**

The father-son relationship between Kratos and Atreus goes through many ups and downs across the game's narrative. In the beginning, Kratos shows less concern about Atreus's well-being as his son and is more concerned with his well-being as a burgeoning warrior. Throughout the game, Atreus yearns for connection: with his father, with Freya, with other characters. The early lessons that Kratos teaches Atreus about remaining vigilant toward others and closing his heart to the suffering of his enemies are identified as being useful for a warrior, but that they do little to soothe the pain of a young boy who just lost his mother. In their conversations, fans describe Kratos's "coming-of-age" through fatherhood as an arduous process based on his desire to hide his past from Atreus; yet, through his full embrace of fatherhood by the game's conclusion, community members recognize him as having undergone drastic character change.

#### A Buried Past

Threads discussing the Kratos of the past are plentiful on the subreddit with debates about whether he feels ashamed for his actions during the Greek arc frequently recurring. In one thread, Tiernanstevens117 identifies Kratos's regret for the cycle of vengeance he perpetuated by killing Zeus in *God of War III* (2010). He unleashed the spirits of the underworld to wreak havoc on the world AND he took away the sun." Other users echo Tiernanstevens117's interpretation: "I don't think Kratos regrets killing Zeus



specifically, but regrets taking things so far... ” (hizinburg) and “He regrets that his quest for vengeance resulted in the deaths of so many innocent people” (PlatinumDL). Users feel that the shame Kratos experiences establishes his fear of Atreus similarly falling victim to that cycle of rage and vengeance; due to this fear, rather than being forthright about his past, Kratos hides the truth of his past from Atreus in the early portions of the game.

*God of War* subreddit community members identify that tensions arise in father-son relationships when a father hides his past from his son. LordLoss25 shares from their own experience in response to LukeHenryLH’s question, “How do you raise your son to not be the monster you are?” LordLoss25 says, “When my dad held back the truth it didn’t work out and caused tension. Because I didn’t really know him, just the version he wanted me to know...A lot like Atreus.” As a father, sircrush27 says that his parents often left him “in the dark” and that because of this, he’s tried to take the opposite approach and be as transparent as possible. Through the early game, Kratos clearly resists any form of transparency with Atreus. However, once it becomes clear that his distance causes harm to Atreus, according to fish2079, “Kratos’s demeanor with his son softened considerably.”

### An Excavated Past

Numerous users commented that Atreus falling ill and Kratos being forced to leave him with Freya was particularly striking for its depiction of Kratos coming to the realization that hiding his past caused Atreus’s illness. TripForce “definitely felt” the palpable remorse in Kratos’s voice when he says, “... I did this to him,” with TheMetalDetectorist calling “the parental accountability and near-humanization of

Kratos... a definite momentary tearjerker.” In this realization, Kratos solemnly tells Freya, “Then I must return home... dig up a past I swore would stay buried.” Freya reminds him, “Who you were before doesn’t matter. This boy is not your past, he is your son and he needs his father.”

In a post titled, “An Open Letter to Cory Barlog and Crew - From a Monster,” Old\_Ratbeard deeply reflects on Atreus’s illness as particularly moving for the opportunity to witness Kratos reflecting on the harm he caused Atreus by hiding his past. Old\_Ratbeard says that the scene “perfectly encapsulates this feeling you have as a father when your child is in danger and it feels like there’s nothing you can do. It’s maddening. It’s the most stressful thing you can imagine.” While on the boat back to his home, the image of Athena appears and Kratos tells her to get out of his head. Old\_Ratbeard talks about her presence exacerbating the stress as “that voice in your head that reminds you of everything you’ve done wrong, everything you’ve failed at.”

As Kratos reaches his home, he opens a trap door and pulls out the Blades of Chaos, the primary weapon used throughout the Greek arc as Athena stands in the doorway and speaks to Kratos in a way that “carved through [Old\_Ratbeard] like knives:”

There’s nowhere you can hide *Spartan*. Put as much distance between you and the truth as you want. It changes nothing. Pretend to be everything you are not: Teacher, husband... *father*. But there is one unavoidable truth you cannot escape. **You cannot change. You will always be... a monster.** (emphasis in Old\_Ratbeard’s post)

It was this line from Athena that gave Old\_Ratbeard pause. He mentions staring at the screen while reflecting on the fact that he and his spouse were going to be bringing another child in the world. For Old\_Ratbeard, his insecurities seemingly came flowing out and all he wanted was to “put it all back inside.” However, Kratos’s response to Athena “rang so true” and “meant the world to [Old\_Ratbeard]:”

**I know.** But I am your monster no longer. (emphasis in Old\_Ratbeard’s post)

Old\_Ratbeard says that seeing Kratos choosing to “weaponize” the voice that haunts him, rather than succumbing to it, was “something really special.” He states, “I’m trying to do the same as Kratos; to take the hard truth of the monster I’ve seen myself become and use that energy to do better. To *be* better” (emphasis in Old\_Ratbeard’s post). Acknowledging the past demonstrates reflections from both Kratos and Old\_Ratbeard that who they were in the past does not determine who they will be in the future.

### An Embraced Past

It is not until the second half of *God of War* (2018) that Kratos begins to explicitly reveal the details of his past to Atreus, with the scene where Atreus gets sick marking the shift in Kratos’s perspective. Before Atreus gets sick, Freya encourages Kratos to tell Atreus about his past; after Atreus gets sick, she tells Kratos that she can break his fever, but he must know his true identity to truly heal. Atreus believes that Kratos thinks he’s weak because he’s not like him. In this moment, the player sees the knowing look on Kratos’s face that what Atreus believes is untrue, but instead it is the opposite: Kratos fears that Atreus, in being a god, will be *too much* like him. It is here that Kratos reveals that they are gods. He says that he had not told Atreus because he

“had hoped to spare [him]. Being a god... it can be a lifetime of anguish and tragedy. That is the curse.” However, players know this to be only partially true as Kratos never reveals how his actions caused much of his own anguish.

Subreddit members identify some of the most important lessons that Kratos teaches Atreus as coming after the revelation that the two of them are gods, with their importance stemming from Atreus’s shift in behavior and attitude after learning his identity as a god. After being told of his godhood, Atreus goes through a drastic shift in his attitude towards others: Where he once questioned Kratos for not caring about Faye’s death, he now belittles her for not being a god. Where he once struggled emotionally after combat, he now kills without hesitation. This appears to be commonly identified when players lose control over his actions in combat. Until Atreus kills Módi, he provides Kratos with support in combat that players control; after killing Módi, he begins acting on his own. Red1573, willbebossin, and many others created threads asking if they were experiencing a bug in the game because Atreus is “being an absolute asshole” (willbebossin). Much of Kratos’s lessons seek to end the life of anguish experienced by the gods. Yet, his continued omission of his perpetuation of the cycle of vengeance during the Greek arc leads to Atreus’s resistance to control and further slippage into that cycle. The simultaneous loss of control over Atreus by both the player and Kratos represents a stark overlap of the game’s ludic and narrative elements. This ludonarrative consistency allows for the player to feel the growing tension between Kratos and Atreus, strengthening the assertions about father-son relationships made by LordLoss25 and sircrush27.

Fans credit Atreus coming to this realization through Kratos holding him accountable for his actions—functioning as another way for Kratos to be better himself and to teach Atreus the same. After Atreus’s insubordination strands the pair in Helheim, the realm of the dead, Kratos scolds his son:

You will LISTEN to me and not speak a word. I am your father—and you, boy, are not yourself. You are too quick to temper. You are rash, insubordinate, and out of control. This will not stand. You will honour your mother and abandon this path you have chosen. It is not too late... We are here because of you, boy. Never forget that.

Siracus breaks down Atreus’s initial shift in behavior as being caused by his upbringing: “Atreus has been raised to suppress his initial emotional reaction everytime [sic], and it festers causing him distress and feelings of inadequacy.” Siracus feels that Atreus hit “rock bottom” after overhearing Kratos refer to him as cursed; yet, in learning that he was a god, his ego experienced a significant boost, reaching the point of hubris:

When Kratos grabs Atreus and tells him he is not himself and that they are in Helheim because of his actions and his out of control nature, it's a sobering slap in the face. I'd wager Atreus just wasn't seeing who he was becoming...

Everything from there is a silent walk back to humility. (Siracus)

Atreus’s initial rebellion against Kratos and his ultimate acceptance and compliance with Kratos’s goal to be better serves as evidence for community members that Kratos can and will positively guide himself and Atreus to be better than the gods of the past.

The moments in the game where Kratos fully acknowledges his past to teach Atreus encourages his son to not make the same mistakes as him. As Kratos and Atreus develop a closeness along their journey, it is evident that Kratos truly desires for Atreus to live a better life than he did. However, as identified and experienced by LordLoss25 and sircrush27, Kratos first learns that he does more harm than good by hiding his past from Atreus. Only after the game's climactic fight with Baldur does Kratos fully reveal his past to Atreus. While his revelation leads to Atreus despairing over his future as a god, having fully embraced his role as a father through truly revealing his past, Kratos relinquishes his fears regarding Atreus's future and rushes to comfort him, responding, "No. We will be the gods we choose to be, not those who have been. Who I was is not who you will be. We must be better."

The construction of these three narratives (Disparaging His Past; Affirming His Struggle; and Acknowledging His Embrace) by the *God of War* subreddit community members are intimately tethered to Cory Barlog's intention to give Kratos a "second chance." These narratives demonstrate the community's recognition of Kratos's acknowledgment of his past as a way that *God of War* (2018) demonstrates Kratos as "being better." Moreover, as seen with Old\_Ratbeard and others, community members seem to latch onto and deeply identify with the notion. For this reason, by passionately defending Kratos's growth from criticism for the remaining toxic elements of his masculinity by games journalists, community members not only support Kratos's redemption, but a redemption for masculinity itself.

## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The *God of War* subreddit community's strategic disparaging of Kratos's past and affirming his struggle, along with their acknowledgment of his redemption through his embrace of fatherhood, illustrate the ways that hegemonic masculinity gets redeemed by the community. In the following section, I discuss how *God of War's* (SIE Santa Monica Studio, 2018) ludonarrative, the intertwining of the game's narrative and players' gameplay experiences, serve as a sense-making resource for players to narratively construct masculinity's redemption in three ways. First, I discuss the community's scapegoating of Spartan militarism to explain masculinity's dehumanization in a way that supports their backlash against feminist critique. Second, I explain the potential rewards that the embrace of fatherhood offers and suggest a reason why those same rewards are not offered to mothers. Finally, I seek to extend Atkinson and Calafell's (2009) work on avoidance of responsibility as hegemonic masculinity's rebirth fully materialized through "the hopeful future," a gray area that absolves masculinity of its problematic past and inoculates it against future critique.

### **The Price of Privilege**

The *God of War* franchise's utilization of the Spartan rhetorically elicits certain understandings of masculinity: self-discipline and control, violence, strength, vigilance, etc. Before any of *God of War's* (2018) narrative occurs, before Faye and Atreus, there exists Kratos's identity as a Spartan warrior. In his interview with Polygon, Cory Barlog highlights the dehumanization of Spartan warriors, stating, "Spartans were turned into

machines, instruments of war...” (Plante, 2018). This metaphoric connection between Spartans and machines initiates a narrative of redemption in the form of Kratos’s nontraditional coming-of-age story as he (re)learns how to be human.

Community members are quick to heap praise upon Kratos’s militaristic masculinity for myriad reasons; yet, the emphasis on this form of masculinity provides an outlet for victimage when criticized: Why is Kratos hypervigilant and skeptical of other characters’ intentions? Spartan identity. Why does Kratos teach Atreus to close off his heart to the desperation and suffering of his enemies? Spartan identity. In praising or critiquing Kratos’s masculinity, one reveals their particular worldview and creates in-groups and out-groups: those giving praise are those with which the community identifies, while those critiquing get viewed as not being “one of us.” All of this demonstrates the win-win situations that get established for hegemonic masculinity: either its sacrifice receives praise in being viewed as selflessness or its sacrifice gets scapegoated through highlighting how extinguishes one’s humanity. This shiftiness explains the expressions of beliefs that people are “projecting modern sensitivities” (SheWhoHates) and not considering the harsh setting of the *God of War* franchise. Consequently, it legitimizes the worry that an adherence to political correctness makes masculinity effeminate—what Gabriel (1998) refers to as “backlash culture.”

According to Gabriel (1998), backlash culture’s success depends upon its ability to “hide its own dogma beneath a rhetoric of universal knowledge, old-fashioned right, individual responsibility and freedom” (p. 53). While Gabriel focuses on whiteness’s utilization of backlash, the tenets he identifies (‘white victims,’ ‘relative knowledge,’ and ‘rights and responsibilities’) only need to undergo slight alteration to understand



hegemonic masculinity's embrace of backlash. Users intertwine the rhetoric of 'male victims,' 'relative knowledge,' and 'rights and responsibilities' to backlash against feminist critique of toxic masculinity in *God of War* (2018). In looking at Cord87's and SheWhoHates's comments, they displace Kratos's toxic masculinity from himself to the dehumanizing training of Spartan warriors. In doing so, they construct Kratos to be the victim of political correctness as developers forcibly change his character. Moreover, if the infiltration social justice warriors who spread relative knowledge (e.g. feminism; political correctness) continues, users believe that masculinity in general will be victimized. Richter\_66's response to Lacina's (2018B) article clearly expresses the sentiment that masculine diminution is the goal of those spreading political correctness: "They will never be happy until there are limp wristed losers like themselves hamfisted into every setting and every franchise on earth whether it fits or not."

Through the scapegoating of Spartan training, community members position Kratos as a victim of masculinity's dehumanization and undeserving of the attacks from political correctness. As community members express their frustration that political correctness ignores the "harsh" realities of masculinity, they reveal their identification with masculine characters like Kratos. Moreover, in their identification with Kratos's masculinity, fans exacerbate their disdain for politically correct feminism as they fear they will be, are being, or already have been, victimized themselves. In this sense, their backlash mirrors Atreus's frustration when Kratos hides his past, effectively yelling at journalists, "How do you know [my experience/the ramifications/*anything* about masculinity]?!"

### **Fatherhood's "Second Chance"**

The way that threads discuss Kratos's masculinity in *God of War* (2018) seem to be the most influential factor to determining the responses from other Redditors. Perhaps it's obvious to think that a thread that discusses Kratos positively would elicit positive responses and that a critique would elicit negative responses. However, the contradictory beliefs that the changes in Kratos's masculinity are simultaneously positive and negative are noteworthy to understanding how the shiftiness of narratives protects hegemonic masculinity. One way that users frame Kratos's masculinity positively is when they center the discussion around his embrace of his identity as a father.

As discussed by LordLoss25 and sircrush27, the emotional distance between a father and son has notable impact on their relationship. This is a lesson that fish2079 identifies Kratos as learning when his "demeanor [towards Atreus] softened considerably" after coming to the realization that hiding the truth of his past had negative implications for Atreus. While SheWhoHates dislikes the change in Kratos from the Greek arc, the fact remains that as Kratos further embraces his role as Atreus's father, his masculinity changes. This resembles autoethnographic work by both Marc Ouellette (2018) and Gustavo González-Calvo (2019) on the potential for shaping masculinity through embracing fatherhood.

While Ouellette's (2018) and González-Calvo's (2019) works both center the influence fatherhood can have on masculinity, they discuss this influence from opposite angles: Ouellette focusing on his role as a father to influence the masculinity of his son, while González-Calvo focuses on the reshaping of his own masculinity through embracing fatherhood. Citing Chu's (2014) observations that masculinity demands that

extinguishing of boys' sense of connectedness to others, Ouellette describes his and his spouse's determination for their son to maintain this connection. Chu's work also helps to understand the shift in masculinity that González-Calvo and Kratos both experienced as they embraced fatherhood.

Through the embrace of fatherhood, problematic masculinity has an opportunity to be better. Subreddit members' recognition of Kratos striving to be a role model and set Atreus down a better path by reflecting upon his past mirrors Ouellette's (2018) and González-Calvo's (2019) desires to do the same for their son. Furthermore, sons seem to be understood as physical manifestations of their father's future—this is the “second chance” Cory Barlog offered Kratos by making him a father (Akiaten, 2019). Through the intentionality behind teaching their sons to be better than them, fathers demonstrate a rejection of their own toxic masculinity and are redeemed in return. For example, the lessons Kratos seeks to instill in his son will hopefully lead to Atreus breaking the cycle of revenge. This explains why *God of War* (2018) powerfully moved Old\_Ratbeard—not only does his identification with Kratos's narrative provide solace for his monstrous past, but his recognition of Kratos's fatherly intentions provides a roadmap to attaining redemption and humanization for himself.

One important note regarding the rewards of fatherhood is that they are not granted indiscriminately. As exemplified by Kratos, sircrush27, Old\_Ratbeard, and Gustavo González-Calvo (2019), fathers must do the reflexive work to be rewarded. In their identification with their sons, not only are fathers granted the opportunity to maintain their son's sense of connectedness, but they are offered the opportunity to reignite their own sense of connectedness that may have been previously extinguished.

This possibly explains why mothers are not granted the same opportunities at redemption. As seen with Kratos, his embrace of fatherhood's rekindling his sense of connectedness was an arduous process; which in turn provides legitimacy to the mistakes he makes along the way. However, femininity is not thought of as demanding the expulsion of connectedness. If anything, connectedness defines femininity; thus, leaving the mistakes of mothers to be considered inexcusable. The condemnation Freya receives from the *God of War* subreddit community exceptionally demonstrates this.

Like Kratos, in reflecting upon her past, Freya acknowledges that her actions were for her own benefit, that she let her fears and needs come before her son's. However, instead of discussing her opportunity for growth, community members call her narcissistic and selfish—with some considering her even worse than Baldur, *God of War's* (2018) main antagonist and Freya's son. The belief that Baldur is less evil than Freya follows the logic that her actions caused him to act viciously, so she deserves the blame for his actions. While it remains contentious on the subreddit, some members show Baldur immense pity for Freya's interference in his life. Having had a "needless death" foretold at Baldur's birth, Freya enchanted him with invulnerability to all physical and magical threats—commonly referred to by community members as Freya's curse. While her enchantment protects Baldur from pain and injury, it also desensitizes him to everyday pleasures; as Baldur says, "Feasting, women, drinking. It's all gone." From this result, EthanGrey argues that Baldur's story is the "saddest," stating:

Freya's possessiveness and selfishness were so profound that she would rob Baldur's ability to experience things that are connected to a healthy sense of masculinity... But the saddest part is when he's able to feel again... He could

have had everything he lost back... But he is so far gone due to his own resentment that the only thing he is fixated on at this point is killing his own mother. (\_EthanGrey)

Community members' pity for Baldur and condemnation of Freya demonstrates three things: First, it illustrates the inexcusability of a mother's mistakes irrespective of any good intention. Secondly, it further indicates masculinity's redemption through the absolution Baldur receives for his problematic actions. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, \_EthanGrey's identification of Baldur being "so far gone" due to Freya's curse establishes her most egregious crime against masculinity: robbing Baldur of his hopeful future.

### **The Hopeful Future**

In defending Kratos against critique for his toxic qualities that persist from the Greek arc, members of the *God of War* subreddit community emphasize his redemption through fatherhood. The first two themes of disparaging his past and affirming his struggle against prophecy evoke a particular feature associated with hegemonic masculinity: avoidance of responsibility. In their analysis of Anakin Skywalker of the *Star Wars* franchise, Atkinson and Calafell (2009) discuss the construction of a gray area that allows for his avoidance of responsibility for his problematic actions. They identify three themes that establish a gray area where responsibility for problematic actions becomes blurred for the hegemonically masculine: an altruistic past, a clone-like will, and the guise of an Other. Similar to these themes identified by Atkinson and Calafell, the themes and subthemes I identify in the *God of War* subreddit work to construct a gray area that absolves Kratos of responsibility for his problematic traits.

Integral to the avoidance of responsibility is the gray area, “the nebulous and confusing space where responsibility for inappropriate actions becomes tangled or lost” (Atkinson & Calafell, 2009, p. 3). Research on sexual harassment within organizations theorizes the gray area as providing a shield for harassers, allowing them to reasonably deny responsibility for their inappropriate behaviors (Dougherty & Atkinson, 2006). Atkinson and Calafell’s work extends previous research on the gray area and avoidance of responsibility by explicitly tethering it to hegemonic masculinity. The significance of this tethering lies in their identification of avoidance of responsibility as not just a characteristic of hegemonic masculinity, but one its benefits. Their work guides my understanding of the *God of War* subreddit community’s narrative construction of a gray area that absolves Kratos of his problematic past and allows for his future to flourish.

The *God of War* subreddit community’s disparaging of Kratos’s past and affirming his struggle against prophecy works to blur the responsibility of Kratos’s past actions. Specifically, these two themes of disparaging his past and affirming his struggle manufacture a hopeful future for Kratos where his past actions from the Greek arc no longer define his being. By identifying certain actions that Kratos does in *God of War* (2018), particularly his embrace of fatherhood and his reflexivity and mortification over his toxicity during the Greek arc, fans argue that Kratos experiences legitimate growth. Additionally, through the scapegoating of prophecy, fans construct Kratos as being powerless over the results of predetermined actions. Instead, through emphasizing the intention behind his actions and supporting his endeavors against prophecy, fans absolve Kratos. While both Anakin and Kratos benefit from the avoidance of responsibility, stark

differences exist between their respective narratives with the shift in emphasis from past to future perhaps being the most significant.

In their analysis of Anakin Skywalker, the bulk of Atkinson and Calafell's (2009) themes center his past. They emphasize Anakin's altruistic past, one of their themes, to explain both others: his loss of free-will in certain settings and how the Anakin/Vader split displaces responsibility for his problematic actions onto Darth Vader and Emperor Palpatine. While the defense of Kratos by *God of War* subreddit members similarly constructs a gray area that blurs the locus of responsibility for his actions, Kratos undeniably does not and should not be discussed as having an altruistic past. If anything, his narrative functions as the inverse of Anakin's in the sense that Kratos benefits from a hopeful future.

In the construction of a gray area that allows for the avoidance of responsibility, shifting the emphasis from the past to the future mutates the focus of critique from something concrete and empirical (the past) into something abstract and speculative (the future). Specifically, in the cases of Kratos and Anakin, this shift from the concrete to the abstract positions Kratos as a partially finished work-in-progress as compared to the complete image we have of Anakin. This results in Kratos not only being absolved of responsibility for his past actions during the Greek arc, but also inoculated against future criticism because there's a demonstrated indication that his future actions will be better than those of his past. Fans undermine future criticism through the purposeful exploitation of prophecies and past demons as delaying any notable progress. Yet, by showing his growth in the face of those hindrances, subreddit community members manufacture Kratos to be a tragic character deserving of compassion. Similar to Lawlor's

(2018) identification of problematic masculinity being validated by essential paternal masculinity, by emphasizing the obstacles that Kratos overcomes in his goal to be better, his hopeful future allows for his problematic past to be redeemed.



## CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

*God of War* subreddit community members' scapegoating of Kratos's Spartan identity to undergird their backlash against political correctness, their understanding of fatherhood's opportunity for redemption, and their recognition of Kratos's hopeful future demonstrate ludonarrative's function as a sense-making resource for the community's construction and defense of hegemonic masculinity's rebirth. While this virtual ethnography is deeply situated within a particular online community focused on one video game franchise, all three can be identified in the "real" world, as well as in other video games: the increasing popularity of Spartans in popular culture and the shiftiness it provides masculinity; the abundance of mainstream video games that center fatherhood as compared to the absence of games about motherhood; and finally, an understanding of how masculinity relies upon the hopeful future to absolve men of their problematic pasts, with Brett Kavanaugh and Brock Turner being two examples.

The way that hegemonic masculinity manufactures consent is demonstrated through the sacrifice of humanity that comes with Kratos's Spartan identity. Popular culture's usage of Spartan characters is not accidental. One case is of particular interest: Spartan Race. According to their website, "Spartan is the global leader in obstacle course racing for a reason—we will challenge you to push beyond your limits" (Spartan.com, 2020). Spartan Race offers six race variants ranging from 5-kilometer, 20 obstacle races up to 'The Ultra,' a race of 50 kilometers and 60 obstacles to overcome. The language Spartan Race uses on their website evokes the same grueling requirements of the *agōgē*

(“Are you determined to push beyond excuses;” “Obstacles that will shatter your comfort zone;” “The ultimate test of strength and perseverance). Like *God of War* subreddit community members, Spartan Race recognizes and utilizes positive cultural associations with sacrifice and discipline associated with Spartan militarism to promote their product. If taking away the element of gender and looking at privileged body types, sacrifice remains the price of privilege. This demonstrates the ways that hegemonic modes of being manufactures consent through the expectation of sacrificing one’s humanity. If one wants the privilege of a certain body type, they need to sacrifice other aspects of their humanity like the foods they enjoy or their free time. Similarly, if one wants the privilege of hegemonic masculinity, they must be willing to sacrifice their humanity in the form of connectedness to others.

In 2010, Stephen Totilo published the article, “The Daddening of Video Games;” in it, he outlines video game developers’ usage of fathers as protagonists and the impact that decision has on games. Since the article’s publication, critically acclaimed games such as *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013), *Assassin’s Creed Origins* (Ubisoft Montreal, 2017), *Dishonored* (Arkane Studios, 2012), and others have centered the stories of fathers and/or father figures. Lawlor’s (2018) research on father-daughter relationships and “essential paternal masculinity” in video games depicts the justification for fathers’ problematic actions. While fathers remain popular characters around which video games are centered, the stories of mothers have received very little attention. One reason for this may be that fatherhood aligns with a narrative of rebirth while motherhood does not. As discussed above, because connectedness is thought of as a definitive characteristic of motherhood, there are no scapegoats that allow for mothers to redeem

themselves for their mistakes; the mistakes of mothers are fully their own. Yet, the rekindling of the extinguished connectedness offered by fatherhood is the “second chance” that Barlog describes, allowing for men to be defined by their hopeful futures rather than their problematic pasts.

As a gray area that allows for men to avoid responsibility for their problematic actions, extensive evidence of the hopeful future can be discovered. When used to look at the Brett Kavanaugh Supreme Court confirmation hearings, it becomes exceedingly evident how similar strategies constructed Kavanaugh as someone with an ostensibly hopeful future who deserved compassion. When asked about his past, Kavanaugh disparaged aspects of it to demonstrate his maturation since high school and college. While it may seem a bit frivolous to say that he struggled against prophecy like Kratos, there were numerous instances that highlighted the resistance by Democrats as inevitable; described by Kavanaugh as “a frenzy on the left to come up with something, anything, to block my nomination.” Through disparaging Kavanaugh’s predatory high school and college behavior and unmasking the Democrats’ prophesied tenacity to block his nomination, conservatives constructed Kavanaugh as a victim whose hopeful future was being jeopardized while liberals mocked him.

The Brock Turner sexual assault case is another example of “the hopeful future” being both a characteristic and benefit of hegemonic masculinity. On January 18, 2015, Brock Turner sexually assaulted an unconscious classmate at Stanford University. As Turner’s case gained prominence, rather than focusing on his crime when talking about Turner, media outlets centered his youth and his promising swimming career. In discussing Turner’s youth and career, he was framed as being robbed of his potential—of

his hopeful future. After Turner's sentencing, his father perpetuated this notion when asking for leniency for his son, stating that his sentence was "a steep price to pay for 20 minutes of action out of his 20 plus years of life" (Daubner, 2016). Aside from the reductive nature of his comments regarding sexual assault, Dan Turner's comments highlight the hopeful future as a gray area by using his son's young age to absolve him.

Individual analyses of narrative and gameplay provide incredibly important insights to the impact video games have on their players. However, a focus on their intersection, the game's narrative influencing the player's decision-making process and the player's in-game decisions affecting their understanding of the narrative, allows for researchers to enter communities of gamers to understand the ways they come to understand different phenomena like masculinity and parenthood. Through looking at the *God of War* subreddit community's experience of both, we see examples of the ways that masculinity utilizes a narrative of redemption to maintain its hegemonic position and protect itself against critique.

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## APPENDIX

**Reddit posts (in alphabetical order)**



- “About the ending prophecy”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/eodoyo/about\\_the\\_ending\\_prophecy/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/eodoyo/about_the_ending_prophecy/)
- “An Open Letter to Cory Barlog and Crew - From a Monster”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/d1t4ol/an\\_open\\_letter\\_to\\_cory\\_barlog\\_and\\_crew\\_from\\_a/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/d1t4ol/an_open_letter_to_cory_barlog_and_crew_from_a/)
- “Anyone else thinks that if this is actually Kratos then it really holds less weight than what the other games make it out to be when you think about how many times he has gone through this in all the other games”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/enyhft/anyone\\_else\\_thinks\\_that\\_if\\_this\\_is\\_actually/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/enyhft/anyone_else_thinks_that_if_this_is_actually/)
- “Arterus not responding to commands”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/gjudww/arterus\\_not\\_responding\\_to\\_commands/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/gjudww/arterus_not_responding_to_commands/)
- “As a son who lost a mother...”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/eouumi/as\\_a\\_son\\_who\\_lost\\_a\\_mother/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/eouumi/as_a_son_who_lost_a_mother/)
- “Atreus and Steven Universe?”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/9a91hd/atreus\\_and\\_steven\\_universe/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/9a91hd/atreus_and_steven_universe/)

- “Atreus keeps using his summon without me clicking square. Is my controller messed up or is he being cocky”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/ddhork/atreus\\_keeps\\_using\\_his\\_summon\\_without\\_me\\_clicking/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/ddhork/atreus_keeps_using_his_summon_without_me_clicking/)
- “Baldur’s story is probably the saddest for me, and it definitely resonates with those who have experience with narcissistic parents”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/93lbiu/baldurs\\_story\\_is\\_probably\\_the\\_saddest\\_story\\_for/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/93lbiu/baldurs_story_is_probably_the_saddest_story_for/)
- “Bug or feature”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/gontjl/bug\\_or\\_feature/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/gontjl/bug_or_feature/)
- “Does Kratos regret killing Zeus?”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8ldzs9/does\\_kratos\\_regret\\_killing\\_zeus/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8ldzs9/does_kratos_regret_killing_zeus/)
- “End game prophecy!”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/em3xmb/end\\_game\\_prophecy/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/em3xmb/end_game_prophecy/)
- “Epic Moment”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/eojm4c/epic\\_moment/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/eojm4c/epic_moment/)
- “First time I saw the World Serpent looming over Kratos and Atreus it scared the crap out of me”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/ep6avi/first\\_time\\_i\\_saw\\_the\\_world\\_serpent\\_looming\\_over/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/ep6avi/first_time_i_saw_the_world_serpent_looming_over/)
- “Foreshadowing during one of the boat stories”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8eoxwr/kratoss\\_boat\\_stories/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8eoxwr/kratoss_boat_stories/)

- “Freya will play a major role in the next game, but not much people seem to be talking about it”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/dtvwx/freya\\_will\\_play\\_a\\_major\\_role\\_in\\_the\\_next\\_game\\_but/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/dtvwx/freya_will_play_a_major_role_in_the_next_game_but/)
- “Give me theories about the next game”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/eev3o/give\\_me\\_your\\_theories\\_about\\_next\\_game/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/eev3o/give_me_your_theories_about_next_game/)
- “God of War: A Son's Perspective”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8kdjzu/god\\_of\\_war\\_a\\_sons\\_perspective/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8kdjzu/god_of_war_a_sons_perspective/)
- “Got any stories to pass the time?”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/bwfxgb/got\\_any\\_stories\\_to\\_pass\\_the\\_time/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/bwfxgb/got_any_stories_to_pass_the_time/)
- “Horse and Stag (Kratos’ story)”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8k5gp2/horse\\_and\\_stag\\_kratos\\_story/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8k5gp2/horse_and_stag_kratos_story/)
- “How do you raise your son to not be a monster?”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/ag2sng/how\\_do\\_you\\_raise\\_your\\_son\\_to\\_not\\_be\\_the\\_monster/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/ag2sng/how_do_you_raise_your_son_to_not_be_the_monster/)
- “I am losing sleep over this game (first time playing!)”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/erg0w2/i\\_am\\_losing\\_my\\_sleep\\_over\\_this\\_game\\_first\\_time/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/erg0w2/i_am_losing_my_sleep_over_this_game_first_time/)

- “I am sorry. I doubted this game. Beat red dead for goty I said? Pfft I said...  
Oh..my god. I don't even have words for how amazing this game was. I am a moron. I made a reddit account just to post this.”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/a9r4i7/i\\_am\\_sorry\\_i\\_doubted\\_this\\_game\\_beat\\_red\\_dead\\_for/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/a9r4i7/i_am_sorry_i_doubted_this_game_beat_red_dead_for/)
- “I finally finished it - had it on break for 2 years”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/eql5nz/i\\_finally\\_finished\\_it\\_had\\_it\\_on\\_break\\_for\\_2\\_years/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/eql5nz/i_finally_finished_it_had_it_on_break_for_2_years/)
- “I hope GoW will regain its brutal, visceral animations”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/aj1zs3/i\\_hope\\_gow\\_will\\_regain\\_its\\_brutal\\_visceral/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/aj1zs3/i_hope_gow_will_regain_its_brutal_visceral/)
- “I think certain stories on the boat are foreshadowing future games”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8ij6cz/i\\_think\\_certain\\_stories\\_on\\_the\\_boat\\_are/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8ij6cz/i_think_certain_stories_on_the_boat_are/)
- “I Think I Might Know Where The Story Is Headed...”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/e7kwhe/i\\_think\\_i\\_might\\_know\\_where\\_the\\_story\\_is\\_headed/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/e7kwhe/i_think_i_might_know_where_the_story_is_headed/)
- “I'm doing a project about God of War and need help.”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/a0x9vv/im\\_doing\\_a\\_project\\_about\\_god\\_of\\_war\\_and\\_need\\_help/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/a0x9vv/im_doing_a_project_about_god_of_war_and_need_help/)
- “I'm kind of stunned how untouched this story is by modern politics.”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8vx7b2/im\\_kind\\_of\\_stunned\\_how\\_untouched\\_the\\_story\\_is\\_by/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8vx7b2/im_kind_of_stunned_how_untouched_the_story_is_by/)

- “I’m so grateful for games like this that address masculinity”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8fcici/im\\_so\\_grateful\\_for\\_games\\_like\\_this\\_that\\_address/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8fcici/im_so_grateful_for_games_like_this_that_address/)
- “Interesting Read”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8k3s11/interesting\\_read/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8k3s11/interesting_read/)
- “Is it possible Odin is not evil?”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/ea8mrp/is\\_it\\_possible\\_odin\\_is\\_not\\_evil/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/ea8mrp/is_it_possible_odin_is_not_evil/)
- “Is the Horse Killing the Stag Story actually Kratos’s Life Story?”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/anelq/is\\_the\\_horse\\_killing\\_the\\_stag\\_story\\_actually/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/anelq/is_the_horse_killing_the_stag_story_actually/)
- “It's my favourite game ever probably so not having a go but does anyone else...”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/erbz2q/its\\_my\\_favourite\\_game\\_ever\\_probably\\_so\\_not\\_having/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/erbz2q/its_my_favourite_game_ever_probably_so_not_having/)
- “I’ve seen a few articles talk about overwhelming ‘masculinity’ in GOW. Is this actually an issue or a loud few??”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8ke8ee/ive\\_seen\\_a\\_few\\_articles\\_about\\_the\\_overwhelming/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8ke8ee/ive_seen_a_few_articles_about_the_overwhelming/)
- “Just finished the game for the first time. (Ending talk)”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/eqr11/just\\_finished\\_the\\_game\\_for\\_the\\_first\\_time\\_ending/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/eqr11/just_finished_the_game_for_the_first_time_ending/)
- “Just finished the game - I loved that there was a logical in-game reason for marking climbing spots”

[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/er93va/just\\_finished\\_the\\_game\\_i\\_loved\\_that\\_there\\_was\\_a/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/er93va/just_finished_the_game_i_loved_that_there_was_a/)

- “Just started playing and... what's the big deal?”

[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/eowj18/just\\_started\\_playing\\_and\\_whats\\_the\\_big\\_deal/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/eowj18/just_started_playing_and_whats_the_big_deal/)

- “Just wanted to say that I think God of War 4 was the most beautifully moving game I’ve ever played”

[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/ffilwj/just\\_wanted\\_to\\_say\\_that\\_i\\_think\\_god\\_of\\_war\\_4\\_was/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/ffilwj/just_wanted_to_say_that_i_think_god_of_war_4_was/)

- “Just wanted you opinions about something Kratos said to Atreus and Mimir”

[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/ekyob8/just\\_wanted\\_you\\_opinions\\_on\\_something\\_kratos\\_said/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/ekyob8/just_wanted_you_opinions_on_something_kratos_said/)

- “Justification of kratos and the stranger”

[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/dxot68/justification\\_of\\_kratos\\_and\\_the\\_stranger/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/dxot68/justification_of_kratos_and_the_stranger/)

- “Kratos regrets killing his father (Zeus)?”

[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/b9b49s/kratos\\_regrets\\_killing\\_his\\_father\\_zeus/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/b9b49s/kratos_regrets_killing_his_father_zeus/)

- “Kratos wouldn’t know anything about that.”

[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/enqqs7/kratos\\_wouldnt\\_know\\_anything\\_about\\_that/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/enqqs7/kratos_wouldnt_know_anything_about_that/)

- “Kratos’ remorse”

[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8tkpeq/kratos\\_remorse/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8tkpeq/kratos_remorse/)

- “Kratos' Warrior Mentality Vol. 2 | Spiritual Lessons We Learned in God of War 4”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/ezpy33/kratos\\_warrior\\_mentality\\_vol\\_2\\_spiritual\\_lessons/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/ezpy33/kratos_warrior_mentality_vol_2_spiritual_lessons/)
- “Kratos’s boat stories”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8eoxwr/kratoss\\_boat\\_stories/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8eoxwr/kratoss_boat_stories/)
- “Let's talk about Faye”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8w2k8z/lets\\_talk\\_about\\_faye/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8w2k8z/lets_talk_about_faye/)
- “Literally gave me chills when I stepped into jotunheim , so tragic”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/eph7w2/literally\\_gave\\_me\\_chills\\_when\\_i\\_stepped\\_into/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/eph7w2/literally_gave_me_chills_when_i_stepped_into/)
- “Longtime fans, how do you feel about the new God of War?”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8kgepl/longtime\\_fans\\_how\\_do\\_you\\_feel\\_about\\_the\\_new\\_god/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8kgepl/longtime_fans_how_do_you_feel_about_the_new_god/)
- “(Major Ending Spoilers) Self-Fulfilling Prophecy”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/aag4ve/major\\_ending\\_spoilers\\_self\\_fulfilling\\_prophecy/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/aag4ve/major_ending_spoilers_self_fulfilling_prophecy/)
- “New Kratos wouldn’t make sense without good ol’ annoying Kratos”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/c953r7/new\\_kratos\\_wouldnt\\_make\\_sense\\_without\\_good\\_ol/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/c953r7/new_kratos_wouldnt_make_sense_without_good_ol/)
- “New to this series”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/entkqk/new\\_to\\_this\\_series/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/entkqk/new_to_this_series/)

- “Nothing to like, well except Aphrodite”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/enlpc2/nothing\\_to\\_like\\_well\\_except\\_aphrodite/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/enlpc2/nothing_to_like_well_except_aphrodite/)
- “Ok so I'm about to start the game and I have a question”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/entcnv/ok\\_so\\_im\\_about\\_to\\_start\\_the\\_game\\_and\\_i\\_have\\_a/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/entcnv/ok_so_im_about_to_start_the_game_and_i_have_a/)
- “[Possible spoilers, maybe] Kratos’ boat stories and their possible meanings”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8efegg/possible\\_spoilers\\_maybe\\_kratos\\_boat\\_stories\\_and/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8efegg/possible_spoilers_maybe_kratos_boat_stories_and/)
- “Question about what Kratos says at the end of the game”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/fn7p9p/question\\_about\\_what\\_kratos\\_says\\_at\\_the\\_end\\_of\\_the/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/fn7p9p/question_about_what_kratos_says_at_the_end_of_the/)
- “Ramblings about GoW's camera”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/bn8qmq/ramblings\\_about\\_gows\\_camera/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/bn8qmq/ramblings_about_gows_camera/)
- “SJW review of god of war, calls masculinity toxic”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8ex7xe/sjw\\_review\\_of\\_god\\_of\\_war\\_calls\\_masculinity\\_toxic/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8ex7xe/sjw_review_of_god_of_war_calls_masculinity_toxic/)
- “[Spoiler] Anyone else tear up when Atreus became ill and upon delivering him to Freya, Kratos utters ‘... I did this to him?’”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/emwtjy/spoiler\\_anyone\\_else\\_tear\\_up\\_when\\_atreus\\_became/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/emwtjy/spoiler_anyone_else_tear_up_when_atreus_became/)



- [SPOILERS] “Getting sick of Atreus. Anyone else? Will he be like this the rest of the game?”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/f8m2sl/spoilers\\_getting\\_sick\\_of\\_atreus\\_anyone\\_else\\_will/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/f8m2sl/spoilers_getting_sick_of_atreus_anyone_else_will/)
- “(SPOILERS) I’m Confused About a Particular Atreus Arc”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/emrx2p/spoilers\\_im\\_confused\\_about\\_a\\_particular\\_atreus\\_arc/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/emrx2p/spoilers_im_confused_about_a_particular_atreus_arc/)
- “Story-telling while in the boat is phenomenal”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8edc11/storytelling\\_while\\_in\\_the\\_boat\\_is\\_phenomenal/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8edc11/storytelling_while_in_the_boat_is_phenomenal/)
- “The cycle ends here, we must be better. Absolutely love that line.”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/faultg/the\\_cycle\\_ends\\_here\\_we\\_must\\_be\\_better\\_absolutely/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/faultg/the_cycle_ends_here_we_must_be_better_absolutely/)
- “The horse and the stag”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8g3m42/the\\_horse\\_and\\_the\\_stag/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8g3m42/the_horse_and_the_stag/)
- “The WORST Thing About God of War (2018)...”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/eog4nu/the\\_worst\\_thing\\_about\\_god\\_of\\_war\\_2018/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/eog4nu/the_worst_thing_about_god_of_war_2018/)
- “Theory about Kratos' fate in the next game”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/bt7vid/theory\\_about\\_kratos\\_fate\\_in\\_the\\_next\\_game/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/bt7vid/theory_about_kratos_fate_in_the_next_game/)

- “Theory about the mural and Kratos' fate”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/bztjg6/theory\\_about\\_the\\_mural\\_and\\_kratos\\_fate/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/bztjg6/theory_about_the_mural_and_kratos_fate/)
- “Theory: \*\*\*SPOILERS\*\*\* Asgard”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/bga6k2/theory\\_spoilers\\_asgard/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/bga6k2/theory_spoilers_asgard/)
- “They should have stuck with original Kratos-Atreus relationship”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8wx186/they\\_should\\_have\\_sticked\\_with\\_original/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8wx186/they_should_have_sticked_with_original/)
- “This is the first game to do this and I find it truly incredible”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/eoj4mh/this\\_is\\_the\\_first\\_game\\_to\\_do\\_this\\_and\\_i\\_find\\_it/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/eoj4mh/this_is_the_first_game_to_do_this_and_i_find_it/)
- “Ugh she is the WORST”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/xf1qs/ugh\\_she\\_is\\_the\\_worst/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/xf1qs/ugh_she_is_the_worst/)
- “WAYPOINT ARTICLE: In ‘God of War,’ Moms Come Last. Thoughts?”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8k6ews/waypoint\\_article\\_in\\_god\\_of\\_war\\_moms\\_come\\_last/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8k6ews/waypoint_article_in_god_of_war_moms_come_last/)
- “We're missing out on a critical father and son relationship development in the next games!”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/ek4oeu/were\\_missing\\_out\\_on\\_a\\_critical\\_father\\_and\\_son/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/ek4oeu/were_missing_out_on_a_critical_father_and_son/)
- “What the hell did they use to make this leather!?”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/eorf52/what\\_the\\_hell\\_did\\_they\\_use\\_to\\_make\\_this\\_leather/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/eorf52/what_the_hell_did_they_use_to_make_this_leather/)

- “When Atreus escapes from being captive by Freya”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/dmcvae/when\\_atreus\\_escapes\\_from\\_being\\_captive\\_by\\_freya/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/dmcvae/when_atreus_escapes_from_being_captive_by_freya/)
- “Why did Atreus turn?”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/f3w7wf/why\\_did\\_atreus\\_turn/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/f3w7wf/why_did_atreus_turn/)
- “Will Kratos change ‘fate’ again?”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/aytbq5/will\\_kratos\\_change\\_fate\\_again/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/aytbq5/will_kratos_change_fate_again/)
- “Wired says God of War is messy and Kratos is a cruel womanizer”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8f2n3j/wired\\_says\\_god\\_of\\_war\\_is\\_messy\\_and\\_kratos\\_a\\_cruel/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/8f2n3j/wired_says_god_of_war_is_messy_and_kratos_a_cruel/)
- “Wouldnt this be awesome?”  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/er0gb6/wouldnt\\_this\\_be\\_awesome/](https://www.reddit.com/r/GodofWar/comments/er0gb6/wouldnt_this_be_awesome/)