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## God of War: Masculinity and Fatherhood Through Procedural Rhetoric

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GOD OF WAR:  
MASCULINITY AND FATHERHOOD THROUGH PROCEDURAL RHETORIC

By

Andrew A. Morgan

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family. To my mother, Sabrina, my brother, Christian, and my sister, Zoé, I could not have done it without you, and I hope to make you proud. I love you all.

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GOD OF WAR:  
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Abstract

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2020

Video games and academia have a long history with one another. Academic researchers have continued to debate the extent to which video games can materialize real world effects. In this thesis, I employ procedural rhetoric and feminist scholarship to analyze the rhetorical power of *God of War*. I focus on the game's immersive procedures and the performances of masculinity from Kratos, Atreus, and Baldur. These three characters all perform different masculinities, and their interactions with one another inform the game's portrayal of masculinity and fatherhood. By engaging in violence and depicting nuanced performances of masculinity, *God of War* positions the player to recognize harmful hegemonic masculine norms and their effects on men and their relationships. This is rhetorically significant, as *God of War's* interrogation of hegemonic masculinity encourages players to interrogate hegemonic masculine norms in the material world.

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## INTRODUCTION

### **Masculine Video Games, Rhetoric, and *God of War***

*God of War* (Santa Monica Studios, 2018)<sup>1</sup> is a third-person<sup>2</sup>, over the shoulder, action and adventure video game for the Playstation 4. The game stars Kratos and his son, Atreus, and is set in Norse Mythology. *God of War* is the newest and technically the fourth main installment in the *God of War* franchise. The video games released prior to the 2018 game were tied together in a trilogy. This original trilogy features Kratos as he goes on a murderous rampage against the Greek Pantheon in a bloodthirsty quest for revenge. It is explained that Kratos is tricked by Ares into murdering his wife and daughter thus sparking his unmatched rage. After killing all of the major gods and titans in Greece, Kratos disappears for an unnamed amount of time only to reappear in Norse Mythology. *God of War* is a video game that, even outside of its narrative, warrants study because, from a technological standpoint, it is nothing short of impressive. The game is beautiful, immersive, and powerful in its communication; winning multiple game of the year awards, *God of War* received critical acclaim for its graphics, gameplay, and story.

As one can imagine, the three games that make up the original *God of War* trilogy, *God of War* (Santa Monica Studios, 2005), *God of War II* (Santa Monica Studios, 2007), and *God of War III* (Santa Monica Studios, 2010), are all gluttons of violence. That is not to say that *God of War* does not have its own action filled with blood and dismemberment, but *God of War*

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<sup>1</sup> From this point on, I will refer to *God of War* (Santa Monica Studios, 2018) as *God of War*. Any references to games in the original trilogy of games will be explicitly stated.

<sup>2</sup> *God of War* is told in the third-person perspective. Third-person video games follow a character from behind, in *God of War*'s case, the default camera angle is over Kratos' right shoulder. This specifically contrasts with the first-person perspective, which would mean the camera's perspective is the player character's eyes. The first-person perspective is probably most known from first-person shooter games (FPS).

approaches violence differently. The original trilogy of games follows Kratos' path for revenge. He does not *need* to kill; he *wants* to. This directly contrasts with *God of War*, where Kratos makes efforts to avoid violence. In *God of War*, Kratos is not violent because he *wants* to be; he is violent because he *needs* to be. Kratos' and Atreus' survival depend on it. Violence being used by man to achieve what he wants *or* needs is nothing new. In fact, literature suggests that men internalize gender ideals that resonate with aggressiveness and violence (Pope & Englar-Carlson, 2001). This key distinction shows a shift in masculine performance and warrants study. This thesis seeks to add to the current literature surrounding the study of rhetoric in video games. In addition to procedural rhetorics and other game-centric scholarship, this thesis draws upon feminist scholarship, textual criticism, and rhetorical theory. Specifically, I trace how *God of War* explores gender performance, masculinity, and fatherhood through the game's procedures that allow the player to interact and progress in the narrative.

*God of War* is interesting because it takes an already established character, Kratos, and transforms his masculinity. Usually, it is rare for the owner of an intellectual property (IP) to change their iconic, titular character. Looking at similarly popular video game characters such as Link (*The Legend of Zelda* Series), Master Chief (*Halo* Series), Mario (*Super Mario Bros.* Series), Solid Snake (*Metal Gear* Series), and many more, video game characters tend to perform relatively the same throughout their respective series. Kratos', and to a grander extent, *God of War*'s, shift was so dramatic, that when the world premiere of the game's trailer debuted at the 2016 Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), audiences questioned if it was the same Kratos from the previous installments (Ingraham, 2016). This is an interesting change that could resonate with or alienate players of past installments, and thus makes the game intriguing from a critical perspective. *God of War* demonstrates that changes in the gaming industry are possible.

Whenever new media forms are introduced, scholars and researchers rarely agree on frameworks for studying the new media. Video games were and are no exception. In this thesis, I delve into the debates around scholarship and video games. Parts of these debates stem from how we should research video games. As Ian Bogost explains, video games are often seen as childish or immature (Bogost, 2011). In some sense, researchers might feel the need to extensively justify researching video games. Other debates center on the significance of video games in popular culture. In *Persuasive Games* (2007), Bogost explains that new forms of expression require new frameworks through which we can critique them. This was true for all media, and certain frameworks even specialize in certain genres of certain media. This suggests that our arguments evolve with new forms of expression. This thesis adds to the existing knowledge on the forms of expression in video games. As video games evolve both technologically and narratively, it is worth exploring how these video games communicate the world. Drawing from literature by feminist scholars, research into how video games may or may not project a toxically masculine culture into the material world is important for Communication Studies. Gender studies, gender performance, and masculinity and femininity are keystone areas of research that can help foster a more inclusive world. My lasting hope is to help bridge the research surrounding rhetorical scholarship of video games and gender studies. These institutions have seen some intersection, but there is yet room for more attention to intersecting points, especially when video games are already critiquing some forms of gender performance.

There is no shortage of rhetorical studies on the established forms of expression: text, photography, audio, video, and much more. Traditionally, rhetoric has always adapted to emerging forms of expression, whatever the timeline. The same can be said of the video game form, which has seen controversy and popularity since its debut in the arcade and then especially

once it reached the living room television. One of the first instances of controversy surrounding video games was the release of the 1976 game *Death Race*. In this video game, the player would earn points by mowing down bystanders. This particular form of violence had not been seen prior. Kocurek analyzes the 1976 game *Death Race*, which was met with backlash due to its violent nature and proposes that perhaps the reasoning behind this controversy was its deviation from the state monopoly of violence, particularly through military and police violence (2012). Analysis of *Death Race* would be just a preface compared to academia's and multiple publics' long preoccupations with understanding video game violence. Both of these concerned groups seem to all share a mutual assumption: the participatory nature of video games means that they share a unique relationship with their audiences.

Video game violence has continued to stir controversy amid concerns that players could project in-game acts into real violence with material consequences. After the Columbine shooting in 1999, video games began to see a large part of the blame for what caused such massacres (Campbell, 2018). It seems that whenever a mass shooting occurs, which has only become more and more often, if the shooter has any connection to video games, it will be mentioned by media personalities, pundits, politicians, and citizens embroiled in debate. Colin Campbell's article cites an instance of *Dance Dance Revolution*, a game in which the player dances to popular music, being mentioned as one killer's favorite game. However the public views violence in video games, the idea that video games *cause* violence has only been amplified recently; for example, the 45th President of the United States, Donald J. Trump, claimed that video games played a part in the murder of seventeen people in the 2018 Parkland shooting (Timm, 2019). Research in the area of violence and aggressive tendencies from video games is exhaustive and seemingly limitless. Some quantitative studies have found a correlation between

playing violent video games and a lack of empathy and an increase in aggressiveness (Funk et al., 2004; Gentile & Anderson, 2003). Other studies have found support for alternative causes of violence, citing that increases in aggressiveness were only found in game players who were also exposed to family violence (Ferguson et al., 2008). In either case, to the average non-gamer, debates around video games usually center on the violence in video games and its ability (or lack thereof) to project that violence into the material world.

While empirical scholarship has sought to trace the effects of video games on the material world, rhetoric offers a distinct set of tools for understanding how video games shape players. The possible projection of ideas from video games into the material world might be better understood through a rhetorical lens. After all, rhetoric has been used to identify meaning and the available means of persuasion for millennia (Aristotle, trans. 2013). Researchers fall into different categories and offer different frameworks for their rhetorical analysis, but the most basic categories to consider in video games are that of the ludologist or the narratologist. Most video game researchers will fall into either of these categories (Apperley, 2006). Ludologists study the game, the playing of the game, and the player, aiming to understand the culture surrounding the game and game player. Narratologists focus on the text of the game to understand the development of in-game narratives. Researchers tend to adopt one of these two frames without using them to inform each other, falling into a false dichotomy (Apperley, 2006, 19). Apperley further suggests that video game research might not be an either/or scenario but rather a combination of the two. Aarseth, meanwhile, proposes ergodic literature as a methodology for studying video games (Aarseth, 1997). Aarseth coined the term ergodic literature to define non-trivial literature. The basic premise behind non-trivial versus trivial literature is that trivial literature can be traversed by simply moving the eyes as one might do

when reading a book. Nontrivial literature requires *something else*, such as user interaction with a dynamic text. While this is an oversimplification of Aarseth's ergodic literature, countless scholars have debated where to draw the line between trivial and nontrivial literature (Wardrip-Fruin, 2005). Some have argued that this classification of video games into ergodic literature can help decrease the toxic culture of video games (Latham, 2019). Other scholars argue that defining literature in classifications of only non-trivial or trivial boils back down to the side of ludology (Murray, 2005). This, Murray argues, ignores valuable information in video games. In a short essay from 2004, Aarseth writes that video game character Lara Croft's body, which has often been criticized for appealing to the male gaze, does not concern the player because a different body would not allow the player to play differently. From this essay, it very much seems that Aarseth, and thus ergodic literature, leans heavily on the side of ludology, ignoring the oversexualization of the female body. Murray poetically compares this to Wallace Stevens' poem "The Snow Man," claiming someone with this view has "a mind of winter." The snow man in Stevens' poem can see the world freely from human biases (Keyser, 2005). Murray's analysis suggests that he believes it is impossible to separate human biases from popular culture representations and that Aarseth's view does not seem particularly adept at informing how video games may or may not affect cultural norms and societal practices. This short summary of events is just one facet explaining how far the debate between ludologists and narratologists have come, while other scholars such as Murray argue for a more fluid approach to analyzing video games.

Video games are multimodal and highly interactive forms of media and thus persuade game players in different ways (Stamenković et al., 2017). While Aristotle's rhetoric defines a speaker and an audience, video games (and other forms of media) are decidedly not as binary.

Rhetoric was first used to critique how effective a public address was on its audience. It was not until as recently as the second half of the twentieth century that other forms of rhetorical analysis began to emerge. Shifting away from the classical text-audience model, video games offer a distinct opportunity to study rhetoric. This is largely due to video games requiring user input in order to bring forth the games' means of persuasion. Without user input, the video game cannot be played, and whether a scholar falls on the side of ludology or narratology, play is required. Video games still have "a text," but their texts are dynamic, and it is unusual for any two players to have the exact same experience during their respective playthroughs of any one game. Video games, along with other participatory media, offer an interesting opportunity to research rhetoric, particularly through developing and testing rhetorical theory.

The idea of video games as a means of persuasion is further explored by many rhetorical scholars. Hayden (2017) explores what the video game *Mass Effect* can teach the player about the intricacies of international relations in politics. In *Mass Effect*, the game player is encouraged to "break the cycle" of international relations (Hayden, 2017, 190). Hayden argues *Mass Effect* allows players to become "active participants" in critique. Active participation allows video games to differentiate themselves from other cultural texts by inviting the player to confront "casual logics, institutions, and practices" (Hayden, 2017, 176). These confrontations can lead to players learning valuable perspectives about the material world. Zamaroczy (2017, 14) states that this active participation separates video games from other pop culture media, claiming that the video game format "most allows for agency, reinterpretation, and contestation." Another study that provides necessary analysis is "Playing with Patriarchy: Fatherhood in BioShock: Infinite, The Last of Us, and The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt" (Lucat, 2017). In this article, Lucat explores how three different video games can craft relationships between a father



or father figure and a daughter. Lucat explains that these three video games tackle one of the most debated elements of society and culture, that of gender performance. The games included in the article's title all share commonalities, but each one explains a different performance of masculinity. Lucat's research concludes that these different performances of masculinity in video games can reify institutions of hegemonic masculinity.

Video game culture and gamer culture are complicated subjects, and to some, their meanings may seem intuitive: video game culture must be the culture of video games, and gamer culture must be the culture of gamers. However, some scholars have argued that we should not treat these definitions as common sense. Instead of trying to define game culture, we should look at who plays, what they play, and how they play (Shaw, 2010). Video games do not just affect culture but are affected by culture. In this sense, video game culture, like all other cultures, is constantly evolving, making it difficult to pinpoint under one totalizing definition. Shaw's three areas of study can be used to help narrow down the definition of video game culture. In any case, the link between a video game's world and the material world is worth studying, both in terms of the game's effect and how the game is affected. After all, "[Video games'] interior world[s] and their connections to the outside world may be inseparable" (Wolf, 2006, 118). Wolf and Shaw seem to be on similar pages, and after reflecting and studying games, I agree with their claims.

Video game culture and gamer culture are rooted in hegemonic masculinity. Video games tend to appeal to the male fantasies of power and sex so much so that Derek A. Burrill (2008) coined the term 'boyhood' when describing video game phenomena that "serve as the prime mode of regression, a technonostalgia machine allowing escape, fantasy, extension, and utopia, a space way from feminism, class imperatives, familial duties, as well as national and

political responsibilities,” (Burrill, 2008, p. 2). In *Die Tryin’: Videogames, Masculinity, Culture*, Burrill critiques video game culture and gamer culture by analyzing how ‘boyhood’ informs video games. It is important to note that ‘boyhood’ is a performance of masculinity and can be accessed by male gendered players of all ages. Video games, Burrill argues, are generally made with a specific audience in mind: those who identify with ‘boyhood’ (2008, p. 3). As the above literature has already explained, video games have an effect on the material world (Shaw, 2010; Wolf, 2006). This effect can be assumed to be the reification of this masculinity within institutions surrounding the culture of video games.

Some video game designers have tried to venture outside of this masculine norm. In some of these cases, this has ended terribly. In 2014, massive controversy erupted in regards to video game culture because of what is now known as GamerGate. Like many other scandals, GamerGate gets its name from a combination of Nixon's Watergate Scandal and whatever the current scandal is actually concerned with. GamerGate was a response to the inclusion of feminist voices and perspectives in gaming communities. Two significant events set off the controversy. The first was the release of Zoe Quinn's *Depression Quest*, a video game in which the protagonist character is someone who suffers from depression. Second, some gaming communities became even more alarmed when Anita Sarkeesian criticized video game culture for being toxically masculine (VanDerWerff, 2014). Quinn's *Depression Quest* distinctly differentiates itself from classic male fantasy video games by taking power away from the player. *Depression Quest*'s gameplay features hundreds of choices the player must make, but some of the choices are crossed out and unable to be selected. Quinn used the inability to select certain options to create a sense of helplessness, a symptom that is often linked to depression (Seligman, 1972). Sarkeesian, on the other hand, had her point proven when she and Quinn

received backlash from thousands of video game players on social media. These “GamerGaters,” the name given to those who oppose Sarkeesian’s view and Quinn’s expression of video games, falsely accused Sarkeesian of having an intimate relationship with a reporter at *Kotaku*, a popular online news website for video games, so that the reporter would publish articles favoring Sarkeesian’s opinions. GamerGaters claim their mission to one of upholding journalistic integrity, while most of them either do not see the sexism in their actions, or they choose to ignore the sexism in their actions. In addition to false claims of at least one intimate relationship, GamerGaters also committed harmful acts and other acts with the intent of violence. These included, but were not limited to, doxxing (revealing someone’s private information such as their phone number or home address to the Internet public), threats of assault, and threats of rape.

The events of #GamerGate put a massive spotlight on at least one issue in video game culture: toxic masculinity. Toxic masculinity is an agent of the patriarchy. Patriarchy has been interrogated by numerous female scholars (Butler, 1999; Foss, 2008; Foss et al., 2006; Kandiyoti, 1988), and their pioneering research into gender studies has paved the way for male-gendered scholars to participate in such research. Unfortunately, some take defensive positions when the patriarchy is mentioned (Johnson, 2005). This is similar to the defensive positions that GamerGaters have taken when video games and video game culture face similar criticism. Johnson defines patriarchy as a society that is male dominated, male identified, and male centered. These elements undoubtedly influence popular culture and favor the male sex. However, even popular culture artifacts that are rooted in masculinity can offer a unique interrogation of the patriarchy.

GamerGate only illuminated toxic gamer culture and the role of patriarchy within video game culture. While GamerGate can be considered a united campaign against feminist voices in the video games, general harassment of women, such as Sarkeesian, from gamers is grossly evident (Consalvo, 2012). Sarkeesian began to receive backlash when she started a Kickstarter campaign that would help investigate the portrayal of women in games. Just one notable instance of backlash can be seen in a game that allowed the player to repeatedly punch Sarkeesian in the face. Sarkeesian and Quinn are not alone in feeling attacked by gamers seemingly for *being* women. Consalvo's (2012) article details a lengthy list of just some of the discrimination that women face from toxic gamer culture. This includes the experience of Jennifer Hepler, one of the writers for BioWare's *Dragon Age Series* and *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, who briefly suggested that combat, like cutscenes, might be skippable by players. While the number of incidents is alarming, Consalvo argues they are not isolated incidents. They are in fact linked to toxic gamer culture, and Consalvo concludes that these incidents need to continue to be documented and that feminist research is critical to interrogating and deconstructing toxic gamer culture.

Video games are not randomly violent or randomly masculine, but they are reflections of the cultures in which they were programmed. Similarly to European- and U.S.-dominated markets, Japan also has a thriving video game economy. Perhaps the most important analysis for the context of this thesis is that games made by Japanese video game developers tend to reflect Japanese cultural norms (Moore, 2017). Moore argues that the protagonists in *Onimusha* (1998), *Sengoku BASARA* (2001), and *Metal Gear Solid* (1998) feature "defensive masculinities," and these performances of masculinity are a result of Japan's cultural pacifism. Moore's analysis is informed by one overarching statement, "we must consider not only the constituent discourses

within a game, but also the greater ideologies external to it in order to perform ideo-cultural readings” (2017, 21). In other words, in order to understand a game’s cultural significance, we must understand both the different cultures and arguments within the game *and* the ideologies in which it was developed. Moore turns to Giroux’s research on U.S. American filmic violence (Giroux, 1995). In Giroux’s article, three types of violence within media are outlined while only two are particularly relevant to video games: ritualistic and symbolic. Ritualistic is stereotypically masculine, does not require critical thought or reason, and reinforces the status quo. Symbolic violence is the opposite of ritualistic, and it “attempts to connect the visceral and reflective” (Giroux, 1995, 303). While ritualistic violence reinforces the status quo, symbolic violence illuminates the underlying ideologies behind the status quo. These types of violence are used to inform Moore’s analysis of the three Japanese video games. Defensive masculinities in video games only use violence in retaliation (when it is warranted), for the protection of others, in an appropriate response of self-defense, and when violence is necessary to continue the game. This contrasts with aggressive masculinities, which functions as the opposite of defensive masculinities. Importantly, *God of War* features both defensive and aggressive masculinities, which procedurally entices the player to make value judgements on these masculinities by comparing them with each other.

By studying the construction of masculinity in *God of War*, then, this thesis can help shed light on the patriarchal structures of video games and video game communities. Using rhetoric as a lens allows for the interrogation of the persuasive forces that are the ingredients in video games. Rhetoric has been used to critique argumentation for centuries, and while video games have been studied extensively through numerous methodologies, I believe that looking at video games through a rhetorical lens offers a unique opportunity of critique. Understanding why toxic

gamer culture exists or at least how video games themselves can contribute to cultural norms and institutions, especially hegemonic masculinity, is important to dismantling harmful and toxic cultural practices. This thesis explores the pervasive nature of masculinity in *God of War* through the lens of procedural rhetoric and feminist scholarship.

In this thesis, I answer three research questions: (1) How does hegemonic masculinity inform the narratives of *God of War*? Hegemonic masculinity is pervasive, especially in video games, but by being mindful of what hegemonic masculinity encourages, I analyze how *God of War* challenges or succumbs to this hegemon. (2) What role does violence play in the game's depiction of fatherhood? Fatherhood and violence are both aspects of masculinity, but they are not two sides of the same coin. Here, I investigate how *God of War* uses violence as a tool that, whether from Kratos' intentions or not, socializes Atreus and possibly the player. (3) How does *God of War* explore fatherhood through choice? Fatherhood, like motherhood and general parenthood or guardianship, does not have a simple and easy to follow guidebook. While *God of War* features a very limited variety of choices, the specific choices that Kratos makes and the choices available to the player might inform relationship building in the institution of fatherhood.

### **Using Procedural Rhetorics to Understand *God of War***

Rhetorical scholarship has evolved as media has evolved. New frameworks are required because different media will have different means of persuasion and sometimes, perhaps new means of persuasion. Procedural rhetoric was first coined by Ian Bogost and focuses on how the set of choices available in programming is central to persuasion and rhetoric (2007). To fully understand procedural rhetoric, it is necessary to know that it is not only used to research video games. It can also be used to research web pages, computer programs, and anything that utilizes computer code. One of the key distinctions of procedural rhetoric is its emphasis on what is

possible through the specific coding of the program. Bogost gives the example of returning a DVD player to the hardware store. If the clerk is human, they might take it back even if the warranty is voided. The clerk might be trying to avoid conflict, or they could also be empathetic to your situation. If the store is run by computer programs, unless the programs have been coded to take the DVD player back, the DVD player will not be able to be returned. This is the most basic premise of procedural rhetoric; programs are limited to their coding. The second part of procedural rhetoric is that it requires a user input. Without user input, the procedures will not sequence. In this example of returning a DVD player, the user is the person trying to return the DVD player. If you (or any person for that matter) never try to return a DVD player, then these procedures, while they still exist, never matter. This, Bogost argues, is what makes computer programs and video games unique forms of media containing different means of persuasion.

To understand the rhetorical power of *God of War*, I combine textual analysis of the game and analysis of critical receptions that mention the game's themes. To gather textual material, I played *God of War*, taking notes on how I experienced the game and what I noticed at various moments. This was always done with the game's procedures in mind. I reflected on these experiences and considered what the game was inviting players to feel. In addition to note taking, I reviewed specific moments in the game through video. The primary notes were taken during gameplay, but in order to accurately describe nuanced details, I also reviewed playthrough videos on YouTube. In addition to procedural rhetoric, I have also used feminist lenses to analyze *God of War*'s performances of masculinity and fatherhood. I recorded instances of dialogue and interactions, then weighed their significance with the overall themes of the game. Procedural rhetoric and critical feminist lenses provide the necessary flexibility to understand the game's dynamic contours.

*God of War* engages in patriarchal values and uses novel procedural rhetorics to complicate certain parts of masculinity. I have chosen to break this thesis into three distinct chapters: Gamers' Tools, Building the Relationship, and The Anti-Father. These three chapters, individually and in their accumulation, combine narrative elements and procedural processes to rhetorically interrogate masculine performances and expectations of fatherhood. Chapter 1: Gamers' Tools analyzes *God of War*'s unique utilization of classic gaming hallmarks such as the game's camera and weapons, classifying these hallmarks as "tools." These tools each work to build the world of *God of War*, but some of them also provide the player an avenue which informs Kratos' performance of masculinity. Chapter 2: Building the Relationship discusses some of the scenes that outline the relationship that Kratos and Atreus share. In these scenes, Kratos and Atreus share dialogue and actions that construct masculinity in front of the player, often implicating hegemonic masculinity's role in masculinity and fatherhood. Lastly, Chapter 3: The Anti-Father is a close analysis of Baldur's masculinity and how his performance affects Kratos, Atreus, and the player. As the anti-father, Baldur's role is to provide an alternative performance of masculinity that paints Kratos' performance favorably by providing Kratos, Atreus, and the player with a performance of hegemonic masculinity that exceeds Kratos'.



## CHAPTER 1: GAMERS' TOOLS

### **Engaging the World**

*God of War*, like other third-person action games, immerses the player in its world through what I refer to as tools. These can range from literal tools, such as a shovel in *Minecraft*, to weapons, such as a sniper rifle in *Halo*, to meta elements of the game that the player character does not actually interact with, such as the camera angle or main menu. Not every tool in *God of War* is a unique rhetorical device, but many of them are. These tools shape rhetorical interactions by offering the player choices regarding how they engage with the world, whether through combat or traversing the game's region, called Midgard and other realms in Norse Mythology. Illusions of choice give the player a feeling of control in video games; they get to choose how they play the game. Of course, this only works through the game's procedures, but as Spector (1986) explains, "The extent to which an individual believes [they] can directly affect the environment has considerable impact on perceptions of that environment and reaction to it" (p. 1005). The player must feel important to the game. While control in video games is always limited, *God of War* blurs traditional lines in video games in which players would generally expect to experience control. One of the ways in which this is achieved is through *God of War*'s tools. In this chapter, I examine various tools in *God of War*, specifically looking at how those tools inform masculinity and fatherhood through procedural rhetoric.

Bogost theorizes procedural rhetoric, which employs the mechanics of the game to bolster its argumentative force and explains that in order to engage in procedural rhetoric, the game's mechanics must be in line with the game's argument. Bogost specifically gives the

example of a platformer<sup>3</sup> game which carries an environmentally friendly message (2007, 88). This game in question — *Congo Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Bark* (2007) — makes the argument that deforestation should be stopped, however the mechanics of the game are similar to *Super Mario Bros.* in that the actual goal of the game is to jump from one obstacle to another. This game has an argument, but deforestation has nothing to do with acrobatics or obstacle courses, and thus it does not engage in procedural rhetoric. This blending of argument and mechanics is what makes *God of War* rhetorically interesting. *God of War's* arguments about masculinity are narrativized through both the characters of the game and the tools at the player's disposal.

As a player of *God of War*, one encounters the world through a variety of mechanical tools. Depending on how the tools work, the player is allowed to explore the world in different ways. Gamers' tools in *God of War* can loosely be categorized into two different subsections: Meta-tools and Kratos' tools. Meta-tools are elements of the game that are characteristic of the artifact being a video game. The player uses these, but the player character, Kratos, does not. In analyzing *God of War*, the meta-tools that I will cover are the camera and the Journal (the name given to one of the two pause screens in *God of War*). Kratos' tools are tools of war, which are used in *God of War* to engage in violence. Here, I will cover the weapons that Kratos uses, the Leviathan Axe and the Blades of Chaos, Spartan Rage, and the management of Atreus. While these are just some of the tools that are at the player's disposal, these are the tools that uniquely offer procedural rhetoric. The tools in *God of War* inform the player of masculinity and fatherhood through unique interactions and utilities. While meta-tools work to engage and

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<sup>3</sup> “Platformer” is used to describe games that fall into the “platform genre.” This genre of video games features obstacle course-like gameplay that is heavily focused on jumping from platform to platform. A classic example is *Super Mario Bros.*

immersify the player in the game, the tools of war offer the player agency and procedurally engage with aspects of masculinity.

### **Meta-Tools**

Two meta-tools that are important to this critique are the camera and the Journal. Like much of *God of War*, these tools were invented decades ago by games that possibly belong to entirely different genres. Importantly, *God of War* takes a rare, if not unique, spin on the camera and a different take on the pause screen, which is Atreus' Journal. Starting with the camera, I explore how immersion in a video game is a key persuasive device, one that helps keep the player invested. Continuing with Atreus' Journal, I examine how Kratos' interactions with education can reinforce hegemonic masculinities.

### **Immersion**

Immersion is an important aspect of all video games. Creating a believable atmosphere can make the difference between a player finishing the game and never picking it up again after the game's introduction. The camera in *God of War* is an interesting tool. In this thesis, when I refer to "the camera," I am not referring to the actual machine used to capture a picture or motion picture, but instead to the picture point of view given to the player. As stated earlier, the game features a traditional third-person, over-the-shoulder perspective. This means that the player will primarily be seeing Kratos' back during gameplay. While this is far from the only view the player will see, it is the only camera the player will see from. *God of War* feels like it is experienced through a single, primarily because the game never cuts to a different camera angle. Similarly to most films and videos, video games typically feature cuts to different camera angles to help tell the story. Video games are usually limited by the amount of camera angles that they can achieve during gameplay. Gameplay is when the player has control, and cutscenes are

scripted scenes in which the player does not have control. In order to bypass the limited amount of gameplay camera angles, video game programmers will break away from gameplay by having scripted scenes in which the player has no control. When playing video games, players can typically expect to encounter these two forms of storytelling: gameplay and cutscenes. *God of War*'s developers made the technological decision early on to not feature any traditional cutscenes in the game. *God of War* seamlessly transitions from gameplay and scripted scenes, sometimes making it difficult for the player to realize they are in control. For the purpose of this thesis, when I reference "cutscene," I am referring to scripted scenes in *God of War*. Imagine a film that was shot entirely in one single take. The amount of preparation and retakes in order to accomplish such a task is a feat in itself. *God of War*'s single camera, while not entirely unique, is technologically impressive. Once the game is loaded, the player will never see the camera make a cut, unless of course, Kratos dies. Instead, when the game shifts to a scene where the player cannot actually control Kratos or take any actions, the camera glides or pans over to that scene.

While this is an impressive technological achievement, this camera works to immerse the player in the game's atmosphere. There is no cut from participation. Every single frame *seems* important to the player, whether it is or is not, and it makes it difficult to look away. The "atmosphere," as articulated by Brown and Cairns (2004), helps the player develop an empathetic connection with the construction of the game. Things such as plot, graphics, and sounds contribute to creating the game's atmosphere. Thousands of voice lines and hundreds of hours of motion capture went specifically into creating a believable atmosphere for *God of War*. The empathetic connection created by the atmosphere that Brown and Cairns discuss can only be enhanced by the immersiveness of the game. The camera in *God of War* helps create a

believable atmosphere, ultimately lending itself to the procedural rhetoric and the deeper social commentary of the game's story.

Even during cutscenes when the player is not directly participating, procedural rhetoric is at play. The player almost always has control over the camera during gameplay. There are brief exceptions, such as during what would be considered the tutorial of the game or when Kratos is scaling a wall. In these moments, the player can only shift the camera slightly. Camera techniques and angles have been carefully studied and executed to perform the most impactful scene for decades in other media (McCain & Wakshlag, 1974). While to some, argumentation from cutscenes could fall under visual rhetoric, video games' unique participatory nature changes the intention of the producer and the audience. When analyzing an image or film with visual rhetoric, the producer and rhetorician must consider the "presence of an audience" (Foss, 2005, pp. 144 - 145). Video games carry with them different intentions by both the producer and their audiences (the player or players). Consider two scenes, one from a film and the other from a video game, which both feature mountain ranges. The audience of the video game might immediately question the importance of the mountain range to *them*. They might question if they can venture to the mountain range, or if the mountains contain something important to the game's objective. Opposite of the player, the producers (developers of the game) must consider players' interpretations of cutscenes. Thus, even when the player is not playing, procedural rhetoric is in effect. Camera angles focus the gaze of the player and thus focus the visual argument being made. *God of War* is no different, but the seamless transition from player control of the camera to uncontrol of the camera subjects the player to *God of War*'s rhetoric more so than other games. This is because *God of War* blurs the line between gameplay and cutscene, often asking the player to participate, although to a limited extent, even during

cutscenes. In addition, *God of War* also limits the player throughout the game. Effectively, *God of War* portrays gameplay and cutscenes as being on a spectrum, one that the game utilizes to different extents as the player progresses. Traditional cutscenes remind the player that they are playing a game; they abruptly end gameplay, sometimes showing camera angles that the player has to reorient themselves to. In some cases, cutscenes even feature better graphics or even more detailed animations. *God of War* also plays with the idea of control in video games. Throughout the game, there are many cases when *God of War* subtly removes the player's ability to control certain situations. This could be for storytelling purposes, but the time and resources spent on increasing immersion suggests there is something more to the notion of control in video games. Chapter 3 explores control in *God of War*, diving deeper into the player's relationship with some of the core mechanics of the game. *God of War*'s seamless camera keeps the player immersed in the game and never breaks orientation, creating an effective means of persuasion and thus allowing players to develop an empathetic connection with the game.

## **Lore**

*God of War* features two different pause screens. The first is the Options menu, and the second is Atreus' Journal. Almost every player would be familiar with the Options menu. Here, the player can change meta settings in the game such as some of the controls, the sound options, lighting options, subtitles, save the game, exit to the main menu, and much more. More interesting is the function of the Journal. The player can access the journal by pressing down on the touchpad in the center of the Playstation 4 controller. Here, the player can change Kratos' and Atreus' armor, upgrade their skills, and track resources that are used to buy new armor or upgrade Kratos' and Atreus' weapons. The journal helps the player keep track of the various quests throughout *God of War*. It also records new enemies and NPCs encountered, artifacts

found, and ancient lore that is discovered by Kratos and Atreus. The Journal is a crucial part of *God of War*'s masculinity, meriting a deeper dive into its composition.

*God of War* uses the Journal as an interesting meta-tool within *God of War* because it interacts with both the player and the characters of the game. The player can use the journal to help construct their interpretation of the world by exploring the lore and quest progression, but similarly to the camera, it is only as useful as the player makes it. If a player does not want to, they do not have to open these sections of the journal for most of their playthrough. Atreus is the one who writes the Journal's entries, and the only time Atreus is not in charge of the journal is when he falls ill, forcing Kratos to fill the Journal entries for this period of the game. It is worth noting that *God of War* is not unique in having a menu that functions as a journal, but *God of War* does make an exceptional effort to make the Journal a part of the atmosphere. Kratos' interactions with the Journal, or lack thereof, prove to be interesting. Kratos is not illiterate, but he does not seem to value knowledge for the sake of knowledge. He values knowledge if it helps complete an objective, something that the journal does not necessarily accomplish. In addition to this, Kratos has seemingly made no effort to learn the language, written or spoken, of Midgard, effectively making Atreus his translator. Throughout the game, references to Kratos' intelligence are made that make him appear as a brute. Baldur even comments, "The boy is the brains," before he kidnaps Atreus during their second encounter with him. This statement from Baldur seemingly adds value to education, something that Atreus is not accustomed to seeing. At the very least, Baldur validates Atreus' efforts to chronicle their journey.

Interestingly, the Journal acts as a method of interacting with Atreus that is not through Kratos. Walter-Echols (2008) explains, "[A journal] is an informal, largely unplanned way of writing that involves students expressing their reactions and feelings about a topic..." and, "...a

journal is intended to be read and responded to by others...” (p. 121). While there is no indication that Atreus is aware of the player’s existence or that he knows he is in a video game, the Journal is clearly meant for the player to access, offering the player some knowledge of Atreus’ thoughts and feelings. Entries in the Codex page of the Journal are composed of recordings that Atreus makes regarding lore he comes across. They typically feature a translation, transcription, or description of the particular piece of lore, along with a sketch of the artifact on the adjacent page. Many of these journal entries will feature short comments by Atreus, some of which are inquiries, humorous jokes, or statements of awe. In any case, the player has direct access to these entries whenever they please, and the entries contribute to the construction of Atreus’ performance of masculinity. One such entry titled “Cost of the Hunt” lists how many men it took to slay certain enemies, and in comparing himself and his father to these men, Atreus comments at the end of the entry, “Sounds like these people weren’t very good at hunting. Maybe they should’ve stuck with deer and boar.” This is one way in which Atreus engages with masculinity that is not shown to Kratos, as competitiveness is one of many ways in which masculinity is performed (Sallee, 2011). Additionally, this comment suggests that Atreus believes that these men are unskilled in performing violence, another staple of hegemonic masculinity. Another entry that distinguishes itself from the others is “Ruins of Veithurgard,” which contains a comment from Atreus regarding his father’s behavior: he believes his father is predictable but is notably still “having fun” being with him. While this entry may not be a direct performance of Atreus’ masculinity, it still extends Atreus’ personality beyond that of what the player sees through Kratos.

The camera and the Journal provide a sense of agency to the player that other tools of the game cannot. The player has sporadic control of the camera. The player almost always has



access to the Journal, giving them a different means of navigating the world and accessing Atreus. These two meta-tools give the player an illusion of choice and agency through *God of War*. As with any video game, choice is relative to what the game allows the player to do. *God of War*, while it does not give the player many choices to make, does make the player feel in charge. However, these are only micro-level interventions that feed into larger orientations and arguments about masculinity. The grand scheme, which would be the whole of *God of War*, is the journey of Kratos exploring his masculinity as a father and his desire to be a good father. When the player is given a personal sense of agency, it only magnifies the larger messages of the game. In total, *God of War* creates an immersive atmosphere that works with the player's agency to engage in procedural rhetoric.

### **Tools of War**

The next set of tools to discuss are tools of war. These are tools that Kratos himself holds or utilizes, and they all offer utility in combat. While the player *feels* the world through tools of war, these tools actually belong to Kratos. These tools are the Leviathan Axe, the Guardian Shield, the Blades of Chaos, and Spartan Rage. The possibility that Atreus' Talon Bow is a tool used by Kratos must also be considered. Each of these tools feature a method of progression that makes them stronger and more useful as the player advances in *God of War*. These progressions, when coupled with the player's ability to decide the type of armor and weapon upgrades for both Kratos and Atreus, also offer the player the ability to develop Kratos to fit their playstyle. If the player wants to play aggressively, they can choose upgrades that help Kratos string together longer combos; inversely, if they want to play conservatively, they can sink resources into Kratos' defensive abilities. Tools of war offer the player some variety in how they engage with violence. Importantly, war, violence, and destruction are all important institutions to *God of*

*War*. These institutions are historically dominated by male bodies, and as such, they are institutions of hegemonic masculinity (Kronsell, 2006). Kratos and the player utilize these tools to engage with those institutions from the beginning of the game until right before its ending, meaning that at least one aspect of hegemonic masculinity is almost always present.

### **The Leviathan Axe**

The Leviathan Axe is the weapon that Kratos uses most throughout the game. Basic combinations consist of light attacks and heavy attacks. Light attacks deal little damage, but they are strung together quickly. Heavy attacks deal more damage, but they leave Kratos open to enemy attacks. Kratos can also aim and throw the axe; it will stick into some enemies and all walls hit. Enemies that are small enough are stuck with the axe will be frozen in place, eventually breaking the freeze if left for too long. Kratos can recall the axe at any point, and upon recalling, the axe will fly through the air and land in his right hand. The frost theme also makes it an effective weapon against enemies with a fire element. Certain puzzles throughout the game require Kratos to freeze an object with the Leviathan Axe to solve said puzzle. The most basic puzzle in the game involves Kratos pulling a lever that activates the mechanism to open a door. Kratos will not be able to make it through the door unless he freezes the mechanism with the Leviathan Axe. Upon reaching whatever is on the other side of the door, he can use the recall command to recover his axe. In addition to freezing, the Leviathan Axe can also slow objects down in puzzles. Functionally, it exists because some objects are too large to freeze.

The Leviathan Axe is one of the primary ways in which Kratos engages with Midgard and the rest of *God of War*. It was given to him by Faye, his late wife and Atreus' mother. As I discuss in Chapters 2 and 3, Kratos' primary means of engagement with the world is through

violence. The Leviathan Axe is present for most of this engagement. However, the Leviathan Axe also has a history with Midgard that far surpasses Kratos'. During the game, the axe is recognized by multiple non-player characters (NPC's), prompting them to interact with Kratos. Two of the characters are Brok and Sindri, dwarven brothers renowned for their craftsmanship and the original creators of the Leviathan Axe, offer to assist Kratos and Atreus in their journey specifically because of the axe. Importantly, Kratos meets both of them at different times in different places, and he only accepts their assistance after some convincing. Without the axe, Kratos, Atreus, and the player cannot progress throughout the world. In some ways, the Leviathan Axe forces Kratos into community involvement, subverting his individualistic masculinity. As the game progresses, Brok and Sindri continue their interactions with Kratos and Atreus, providing them with opportunities to perform nuanced expressions of their respective masculinities. Kratos' masculinity is one of the focal points in Chapters 2 and 3, but his general unfamiliarity with his son is very much consistent with his reluctance to communicate or engage with others. This reluctance to communicate is a standard form of masculine communication (Carli, 2006), meaning that Kratos' possession of the axe offers Atreus and the player a glimpse into Kratos' masculine performance.

### **The Blades of Chaos**

The Blades of Chaos are Kratos' primary weapons from the original trilogy. They offer more range than the Leviathan Axe and have a more fluid combat style. The Blades of Chaos are twin scimitar-shaped swords that are each attached to Kratos' wrists by chains. A portion of the chains are seared onto Kratos' wrists and the excess of the chains wrap around his wrists and the other ends attach to the blades at their hilts. The chains seem to vary in length. While there is certainly a limit to their length, at some points they can reach around twenty feet long. The

Blades of Chaos, like the Leviathan Axe, also function as a means of progression and can be used to solve puzzles and unlock hidden treasures in the game. In Helheim, it is said to be so cold that fire cannot exist there, but this is not the case for the magically imbued Blades of Chaos. Not only do the Blades of Chaos permit Kratos and the player access to Helheim, but this also suggests the Blades of Chaos are closely linked to death, as Helheim is Norse Mythology's version of the underworld. In addition, the Blades of Chaos allow Kratos to grab the Winds of Hel and momentarily contain their energy. Nearby, there will be a location where the Winds of Hel can be placed and contained more permanently, presumably advancing a puzzle. If Kratos cannot find the designated location within a short amount of time, he will lose the Winds of Hel and they will return to the last stable location which they resided in. These puzzles, along with puzzles that are completed with the Leviathan Axe, can be repeated until completion. These procedures force the player to view weapons as tools, encouraging players to momentarily look beyond their capabilities of violence.

The journey to recover the Blades of Chaos feature Kratos being haunted by the ghost of Athena and offer some insight to how Kratos views his past.. Ironically, Kratos is often referred to as the Ghost of Sparta, a name given to him for his ghostly white appearance. While Kratos does not seem to have severe Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, he very much seems haunted by his past as a soldier. His attempt to bury the Blades of Chaos can be compared to him attempting to bury the past. He also hides the scars on his forearms from the chains being seared into his skin. In the opening scene of *God of War*, Kratos' wraps around his forearms come undone from chopping down a tree with the Leviathan Axe, momentarily revealing some of his scars. A look of disgust appears on his face, and he aggressively rewraps his wrists. Interestingly, Kratos does not hide the scar on his abdomen from when he was pierced by the Sword of Olympus in the

previous games. Achter (2010) suggests that “dominant discourses invoke veterans’ bodies as a metonym for both the nation’s health and the condition of the war...” (p. 46). Kratos’ scars, at least the ones from his own Blades of Chaos, may remind him of the atrocities he committed as a soldier, which he may view as the condition of the war. Kratos only recovers the Blades of Chaos because he needs them to save Atreus’ life. With this interpretation, Kratos’ return to the Blades of Chaos for the sole purpose of saving Atreus’ life could have some weight to his commitment as a father. Instead of hiding his past, Kratos confronts it, but only because Atreus’ life depends on it. It is also worth noting that when prompted to recover the Blades of Chaos, Kratos refers to it as returning home — though it is unclear whether he is referring to the Blades of Chaos or his house in Midgard where they are buried. In the case that he is referring to the Blades of Chaos, it offers an interesting perspective on Kratos’ emotions and how he may feel about his past life. His past life is one of revenge, hate, and the pursuit of violence, similar to Baldur’s masculinity that is explored in Chapter 3. Hiding his scars while simultaneously referring to the Blades of Chaos as “home” suggests that Kratos is ashamed of the atrocities he committed, but there is also a familiarity with the violence that the Blades of Chaos enable. This would also suggest that Kratos is ashamed of what he feels comfortable or familiar with. Men distancing themselves from what they feel comfortable with seems contradictory, but it is very much a strategy of masculinity, offering them ways to re-establish masculinity in unfamiliar territories (Simpson, 2004).

### **Spartan Rage**

Spartan Rage, similarly to The Blades of Chaos, is a tool that Kratos carries with him from his past life as a Spartan warrior. Located underneath Kratos’ health meter, which indicates how close Kratos is to dying in combat, is Kratos’ rage meter. As Kratos lands attacks on

enemies with any of his weapons, he fills this rage meter. In addition to combat, the player can also find glowing orangish-red orbs of the ground. These are rage orbs, and upon stomping on them, they will fill a portion of Kratos' rage meter. Once Kratos' rage meter is full, he can activate Spartan Rage, letting out a roar and ceasing to use any weapons, instead opting to brutalize enemies with his fists. It should be noted that the attack patterns in Spartan Rage are different from unarmed combat. While in Spartan Rage, Kratos' attacks are continuous and rapid, and he can lunge great distances to continue a fury of attacks. This contrasts with standard unarmed combat in that the standard form of unarmed combat focuses more on heavy, stunning blows rather than a rapid fury. Spartan Rage, while definitely a means in which Kratos and the player engage in violence, is different from the Leviathan Axe and the Blades of Chaos. As a tool, Spartan Rage provides the player some agency in how they choose to use it. Spartan Rage can be used by the players whenever the rage meter is full and can even be activated awkwardly if Kratos is not in combat where it offers no utility. In combat, Spartan Rage provides a number of uses and expands the player's strategic arsenal. Probably the most useful function that Spartan Rage offers is that Kratos regains health when he deals damage to enemies. Spartan Rage also deals increased damage and drastically increases Kratos' mobility in combat. If the player desires, they can save Spartan Rage for moments when they find Kratos close to death, or they could opt to use Spartan Rage at the beginning of a combat scenario. If the player anticipates a potentially long or difficult battle, they could make the strategic choice to use Spartan Rage when entering the fight in hopes of collecting enough rage to get a second activation.

The procedural rhetoric behind Spartan Rage calls into question the relationship between masculinity and emotion. Kratos' gaining health when dealing damage in Spartan Rage can

easily be interpreted as anger and rage being good emotions for Kratos. The utilitarian assumption is that most people prefer pleasant emotions (Veenhoven, 2004), but this is not always the case (Tsai et al., 2006). *God of War* makes no indication that Kratos personally likes being angry, but it does imply that anger is the only emotion that Kratos is comfortable with. Expectations are important here: in a violent action setting, anger is implied and expected throughout most of the game. However, Kratos expresses anger with relative ease compared to any other emotion and generally practices stoicism. Men are more likely to interpret an emotion as anger even if that is not the emotion being displayed (Neel et al., 2012). There are some cases where the player can see Kratos' other emotions, but he scarcely reveals them to Atreus. This could be because he is not comfortable expressing them, but in any case, many of these other emotional moments will be covered in depth in the following chapters. Kratos seems to think that it is acceptable for men to be angry. Angry men are more visible (Williams & Mattingley, 2006), often feeding into patriarchal power roles and solidifying male privilege, particularly in areas dominated by masculine norms. Even in the real world, expressing anger can prove advantageous for men, and this is especially significant in industries heavily dominated by men. While the ratio between men and women who play video games is close to one to one, the ratio between developers is not as equitable. Most recent data show that gender identifying men account for more than 70% of game developers (Gough, 2019). It is difficult to ignore this data when discussing masculinity in one of its products. *God of War*, whether the artists intended or not, appeals to hegemonic masculinities through emotional resonance.

Lastly, when discussing Spartan Rage, it should be noted that Spartan Rage must be activated to progress through the game at key parts in the story, such as the player's first encounter with a troll, the fight with The Stranger (Baldr), and when Atreus is briefly taken by

the Dark Elves. While not the totality of moments in *God of War* where this is required, it provides evidence of Spartan Rage being used as a means of progression, both for the linear narrative and for Kratos. In these moments, the player is prompted to activate Spartan Rage during non gameplay moments, effectively blurring the line between what is and is not participatory for the player. If the player chooses not to activate Spartan Rage, then no progress can be made. *God of War* is clear: Kratos *needs* to be angry, at least in certain moments, for his and Atreus' survival. For the player, *God of War* uses these moments to uphold investment in the main narrative, and it gives the player a feeling of agency during non gameplay scenes, something that is an important facet of immersion.

Spartan Rage is a versatile tool in *God of War*. The player can use Spartan Rage to help immensely in combat and is required to use it to progress through certain points in the game. While it encourages engagement with one's emotions, it does so narrowly, only adhering to broad hegemonic masculine norms. Spartan Rage is a limited ability, meaning that players are encouraged to use it only when they absolutely need it. Of course, any player has the ability to use it whenever they desire, but finiteness of Spartan Rage also suggests that a constant state of anger and rage is unsustainable. In addition, Spartan Rage as a requirement for progressing through the game creates a feeling of necessity within the player. At least, it validates the expression of emotions in performances of masculinity, albeit an emotion associated with masculinity. Not only is Spartan Rage a tool that is used within *God of War*, but it is also a tool used by *God of War*. Spartan Rage discourages the player from putting the controller down, keeping them engaged even during cutscenes. This adds to the player's, "feeling of being there," an important aspect of immersion in video games (McMahan, 2003). An invested player is good



for *God of War*; it ensures that the player will complete the game and that they will take part in its narrative development.

### **Atreus**

Weapons and abilities are not the only tools in *God of War*; Atreus also offers utility, both in combat and outside of it. In this sense, Atreus is also a tool at the player's disposal. During combat, the player can command Atreus to fire arrows at a target. If Kratos is not locked onto any enemies, then he will shoot in the direction that the camera is looking and will target enemies in that field of view. While this does not deal much damage to any enemies, Atreus can be equipped with different types of arrows that deal elemental damage. Arrows will also momentarily stun enemies, which will interrupt enemies when they are in the middle of their attack animation. It is especially useful when fighting Revenants, a type of enemy that can teleport short distances. If Kratos tries to quickly rush or throw the Leviathan Axe at the Revenant, they will teleport away. However, since Atreus' bow and arrow deploys much quicker than either of those methods, he can stun the Revenants long enough for Kratos to approach them. Atreus' Talon Bow really shines in combat scenarios such as these, as well as when Kratos and Atreus are surrounded by a large number of enemies, acting as crowd control<sup>4</sup> in both scenarios. These procedures make Kratos' and the player's interaction with Atreus a requirement to progress through Midgard and the game respectively. Interestingly enough, the extent to which Atreus helps in combat and outside of it are mostly dependent on the player. However, some procedures, such as combat interactions with the Revenants, force the player to seek help from Atreus. If the player is entirely reliant on Kratos' abilities, progression is literally

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<sup>4</sup> Crowd control, or CC, in video games refers to the ability to reduce the effectiveness of enemies. The mechanics of CC vary depending on the game. CC can abilities range from disarming, stunning, displacing. In *God of War*, CC can be both stunning enemies so they cannot move or distracting them to take their attention off of Kratos.

impossible, suggesting the hegemonic masculine norm to not seek help is unproductive, harmful, and disabling.

Atreus' abilities are customizable to the player's desire and while Atreus' customization is not as broad or deep as Kratos', it still offers the player some agency in how the game is played. The damage that Atreus deals with the Talon Bow can be upgraded, as well as crowd control effects that he applies to enemies. There are different types of arrows that Atreus can be equipped with based on the type of enemy or combat scenario. Atreus also can be equipped with different types of runic abilities known as runic summons. Runic summons are special attacks that are represented with different animals and when activated, assist Kratos and the player in some way. Most runic summons assist in combat by dealing damage to enemies or applying crowd control effects, but the squirrel summons assists the player by finding orbs for Kratos. Interestingly enough, Atreus' abilities are under "Talon Bow" in the Journal, which one could argue decreases the connection that the player could have with Atreus. Although this falls in line with how the Journal categorizes other tools that the player has access to, the primary way in which the player interacts with Atreus in combat is through the Talon Bow. In this sense, the player is not necessarily managing Atreus, but instead managing the Talon Bow.

Management of Atreus is relatively simple and does not require much attention. Atreus' armor can be upgraded depending on how many resources the player decides to sink into it. Upgraded armor offers better stats, however, Atreus does not have a health bar or a clear indication of when he is incapacitated, but he can be. If they are overrun by a large number of enemies, there are points where Atreus can be grappled and presumably killed. He will usually say something before this happens, such as, "Father!" or, "Help!" indicating to the player that action needs to be taken regarding his health. The player can then rush to Atreus' aid, or they

can ignore him, which would lead to his probable death. Atreus' incapacitation or death ends the game and reverts the player to the last checkpoint. These procedures link to rhetorics of parenting and responsibility: the game places emphasis on parenting only when the child is in danger. With no other way to manage Atreus' wellbeing, much of the player's engagement with parenting involves rushing to Atreus' aid when he is in danger. This style of parenting is very much echoed by Kratos' own action throughout the story. Most significantly, this can be seen when Atreus falls ill, forcing Kratos to seek help from Freya. This notably ventures Kratos outside of his parental comfort zone, but that is covered in greater depth in Chapter 2.

Taken together, these tools provide a frame that shows the diversity in performances of masculinity. Violence in *God of War* is almost ever present, but there are a variety of ways in which the player can utilize the tools of war that give choice to the way in which they engage with violence. In addition to violence, these tools also offer the player unique means of progression throughout the game. In fact, all of these tools *must* be used to continue that progression. As such, each of these tools offers the player something outside of combat in some way. While the Leviathan Axe and the Blades of Chaos each give the player access to different areas or realms in *God of War* through means of narrative or puzzles, Spartan Rage and Atreus offer the player different performances of masculinity. Spartan Rage, while used in combat and during cutscenes as a tool for progression, also plays on the hegemonic masculine norm to engage with anger. Similarly, management of Atreus undoubtedly reflects Kratos' fathering of his son. Tools of war are the more explicit tools utilized by *God of War*, but they are also tools that the player will most easily identify. Their persistence throughout the game means that the player will experience their procedural rhetoric as consistently as they choose to play the game.

## Immersive Procedures

*God of War's* tools shape its procedural rhetorics, and by implication, its arguments about masculinity and fatherhood. In a vacuum, the camera and Journal are both just ordinary functions of the game, and the tools of war are just different means of defeating enemies. However, there is a certain appreciation that the players can grow regarding the uniqueness of *God of War's* tools. The camera, while a technological achievement in itself, works to create a robust sense of immersion in the game, allowing the atmosphere to encapsulate the player. The Journal, while other games have similar menu functions, allows the player some brief interaction with Atreus that is not through Kratos, developing a deeper sense of empathy. The Leviathan Axe and the Blades of Chaos both offer the player valuable context when interpreting Kratos' performance of masculinity; the unique interactions they have with Kratos and the world proves their utility is beyond combat. Spartan Rage not only acts as means to explore Kratos' emotional capacity, but it also brings into question exhibiting emotions in performances of masculinity. Finally, Atreus is more than just Kratos' son coming along for the journey; he also spotlights some of Kratos' masculine fatherhood.

The tools come together to not only immerse the player in the world of *God of War*, but also to immerse the player in a world that interrogates masculinity. The tools themselves are rich with commentary of hegemonic masculinity, and the player is actively participating in the construction of masculine performances simply by playing. Of course, meanings and judgements are open to the player's interpretation, but playing a video game that centers around the relationship between father and son, blurs the lines of control, and provides the player with tools to engage in masculine norms makes the game's procedures nearly impossible to ignore. Because the tools of the game carry with them notions of masculinity, whether it be emotions,

violence, or fatherhood, the player is persistently asked to draw interpretations about masculinity in the material world. Whatever the player's interpretations may be, they become pervasive and can perhaps change as the game progresses. As the story progresses, so too does Kratos' and Atreus' performances of masculinity. While their masculinities and relationship are the topic of discussion are the topics of Chapter 2: Building the Relationship, it is worth mentioning that player's interpretations of how these tools affect their playthrough will probably change as they continue participating. Because the player's use of the tools participates in constructing arguments about masculinity, it stands to reason that their interpretations of masculinity will change as the main characters evolve.

## CHAPTER 2: BUILDING THE RELATIONSHIP

### Framing the Build

*God of War* features a unique narrative in its immersive world. While the previous chapter focused on the mechanics of the game, this chapter and the next will focus on the game's narrative along with how *God of War*'s procedures inform masculinity through men. This chapter is entitled "Building the Relationship" because the relationship between Kratos and Atreus is a vital procedural experience shaping the game's construction of masculinity. *Building* is key, because their specific relationship already has a foundation to work with — Kratos and Atreus are not unfamiliar with one another. Furthermore, *building* is important to the medium in which procedures access rhetoric: computer programs, which are key to understanding *God of War*'s arguments about masculinity and their relationship with the player. Starting from the beginning and working my way to the game's ending, I explore key moments and plotlines that highlight the building aspect of the relationship. In *God of War*, there are specific moments that might occur a few times or even once throughout the game, and these moments take place in various plots and subplots that inform the player about the relationship. These moments, plots, and subplots adhere to themes of masculinity and parenthood, and they often comment on traditional tropes that are found in other media.

*God of War* works to build the relationship between Kratos and Atreus in front of the player. Much of the game is solely their interactions, making this relationship procedurally unavoidable. While not every player will draw interpretations of hegemonic masculinity and arguments surrounding it, *God of War* undoubtedly comments on typical father-son dynamics by calling into question the survivability of hegemonic masculinity. Kratos' struggle with his own

masculinity is seen at various points throughout the game as he takes part in a tug-o-war between playing into hegemonic masculine performances and trying to teach Atreus to be a better man than he is. The struggle comes from Kratos having to learn compassion and empathy as he learns the role of being a father. Because Atreus can only see some of Kratos' struggle and what he does see is up to his own interpretation, this battle of masculinities plays a key role in building their relationship.

To preface how masculinity affects their relationship, it is important to note that Kratos appears to be mostly absent in Atreus' earliest stages of life. The relationship that a child has with their absentee parent is still a relationship. While initially experiencing immense sadness, children eventually develop coping mechanisms that increase their resilience in certain situations (Ganub et al., 2019). It is made painfully obvious that Atreus feels like Kratos is at least not emotionally invested in him. However, the details of Kratos' presence are never revealed in front of the player; only Atreus' feelings are. It stands to reason that Atreus' perceived on and off presence of his father in his life could cause confusion in Atreus' emotional development. *God of War* also heavily suggests that his relationship with his late mother, Faye, was much more developed than the one he shares with his father. Atreus, while trying to win his father's favor, struggles with finding his own masculinity or at least one that he feels comfortable with. This chapter analyzes key moments in *God of War* that inform both Kratos' and Atreus' masculine performances and how these performances build a father-son relationship in front of the player.

### **Laying the Foundation**

This chapter features many interactions between Kratos and Atreus that offer the player an opportunity to see different masculinities at play. One of the first interactions in which this

happens is Kratos commanding that Atreus showcase his ability to hunt deer. Kratos asks Atreus, “She taught you to hunt?” referring to Faye, Atreus’ late mother. Atreus affirms and they initiate the hunt. Before continuing through the rest of this short introduction to the game, I would like to direct attention to Kratos’ general unfamiliarity with Atreus. Reflecting typical hegemonic masculine norms, the familial relationship between Kratos, Atreus, and Faye featured Faye in the role of caregiver. She raised Atreus, whereas Kratos’ role, while not entirely absent, was limited in interactions with Atreus, effectively making him a secondary parent. This family dynamic is familiar in other Western pop culture and media (Schmitz, 2016; Wall & Arnold, 2007), so *God of War* is already providing the player a frame with which they are probably familiar. It is obvious that both Kratos and Atreus are treading new ground where Kratos is taking over the role of caregiver, something that Atreus is not used to seeing from a man.

Atreus, seeking guidance, asks, “What direction?” Kratos responds, “In the direction of deer.” Much of Kratos’ dialogue with Atreus resembles this brief exchange between our two main characters. Kratos’ speaking style is short and to the point, comparable to efficiency commonly seen in the military hierarchies; indeed, Kratos is trying to navigate returning to civilian life after decades as a soldier. Bulmer and Eichler (2017) argue that post-military civilian life poses difficulties in gender performance. Attempting to unmake Kratos’ militarized masculinity would be especially difficult as his social interactions are extremely limited, and he does not have professional nor peer support in navigating this space. Kratos’ journey as a father sometimes conflicts with his militarized masculinity, and it is evident in his shortened interactions with Atreus. This conflict dampens the potential progression that Kratos could be making as a father trying to develop a healthy relationship with his son.



As they continue their hunt, Kratos and Atreus encounter the Draugr, a common enemy of which they will kill hundreds by the end of the game, and a troll. Importantly, when they are ambushed by the troll, Atreus questions, “We’re going to fight that thing?” Kratos responds with, “We have no choice!” As an action/adventure game, *God of War*’s key method of engaging with the player is through violence. Players of *God of War* expect violence, something that Kratos is no stranger to. In the previous trilogy of games, Kratos actively sought violence even when he was not threatened, and while this does not seem to be the case in *God of War*, Kratos is clearly fluent in the language of violence. In order to access traditional masculinity, men engage in violence or have a willingness to engage in violence (Messerschmidt, 1999). Violence is just one of the ways in which Kratos performs masculinity, but it is highly represented throughout *God of War*. After defeating the troll, Atreus rushes to its corpse screaming and slicing its shoulder. Kratos stops Atreus, and Kratos tells him that he lost control; this indicates that Kratos does not wish to engage in senseless violence, but he does view it as a necessity for survival. In addition, Kratos’ emphasis on control foreshadows the role in which control plays in performances of hegemonic masculinity, something that is especially important to the analysis of Chapter 3.

Self-defense is a common media trope depicting justified violence. *God of War* reflects this common trope throughout the narrative. As a championed depiction of violence (Stroud, 2012), self-defense often resonates with audiences. Audience resonance is important to *God of War*’s rhetoric, as an invested audience is more likely to engage with the game’s procedures; the experiences feel more believable. In Stroud’s review of literature, using violence as a means of survival and protection is connected with hegemonic masculinity. In interviews with twenty men who possess concealed carry permits for firearms, Stroud’s analysis reveals that older men often

obtain concealed carry permits which give access to this hegemonic masculinity. The logic suggests that if a man cannot protect himself, his family, or his property, then he is not masculine. This concern was a common theme in Stroud's interviews. Younger men in particular are able to engage in violence with less at stake. This perhaps reflects Kratos' and Atreus' different approaches to violence, something that will continue to be explored throughout the game and this chapter.

In the end of the game's introduction, Atreus finally gets to prove to his father that he can hunt. Drawing back his bow, Atreus holds steady and releases, hitting the deer in its center mass but not killing it. Atreus, overwhelmed with the thought of looking something in the eye before taking its life, is unable to sink his knife into the deer. Kratos places his hand over Atreus' and initiates the force so that the knife pierces the deer, while Atreus finishes killing it humanely. Atreus grieves and Kratos looks onward before raising his hand to place it on Atreus' shoulder, assumingly to comfort his son. However, Kratos lowers his hand, and Atreus never knows of Kratos' hesitation or even consideration to show compassion. Hegemonic masculine norms discourage men from showing compassion, and in modern environments can even derail career paths and opportunities (Gentry et al., 2015). Conversely, the Gentry article did not find similar results for women in the workforce. Kratos' clear lack of experience with empathy and his reluctance to seek help will prove to create the perfect recipe for stubborn relationship growth. After all, men in leadership positions are also discouraged from asking for help, as they will appear as less qualified and less confident, while women do not suffer this penalty (Rosette et al., 2015). Atreus' silent plea for help and Kratos' conflict with showing empathy both resonate here. Atreus, eager to prove that he can make his father proud, refuses to explicitly ask for help because he is afraid of disappointing his father. Kratos understands this dynamic and helps

anyway, providing silent leadership as he navigates his own path into fatherhood. However, the hesitancy and refusal to show compassion in this scene is a direct result of toxic hegemonic masculinity. Only Kratos and the player share knowledge of this interaction, connecting Kratos to a one-way, intimate relationship with the player and reinforcing the immersive power of procedural rhetoric.

So far, this chapter's analysis has focused on the very beginning of *God of War*, which offers a strong starting point that paves the way for the game's procedures. The litany of ways in which hegemonic masculinity affects Kratos and Atreus in this short quest is a perfect precursor to what the rest of the game entails. Effectively, it lays the foundation, providing the player a frame from which to view Kratos' and Atreus' relationship. In addition, the deer hunt plot introduces many motifs of masculinity throughout the game. Importantly, the deer plot functions as a tool that establishes the starting point of Kratos' and Atreus' eventual progression of masculinities. This is advantageous to the procedural rhetoric within *God of War* because it shows a genuine approach to spotlighting social issues, such as hegemonic masculinity and violence, in the real world. These are just some of the ways that masculinity affects Kratos' and Atreus' relationship; below, I cover in semi-chronological order some of the other key events in this relationship.

The next key scene is the introduction of Baldur, which happens immediately after Kratos and Atreus return home from hunting deer. Because Baldur's masculinity is central to Chapter 3, I will only briefly cover this particular encounter. Baldur is initially introduced as The Stranger. It is not until later in the game that Baldur is revealed to be his true name. As Kratos and Atreus momentarily rest in their cabin home, they are met with a knock at the door. Confusion encompasses both as the voice at the door commands the door to be opened. Kratos tells Atreus

to hide in what appears to be a basement under the floor of the cabin before he answers the door. Upon answering the door, Kratos is immediately met with Baldur proclaiming that he thought Kratos would be taller. Immediately, this scene reinforces the masculine emphasis on size. Additionally, it seems fairly obvious that Baldur's intentions are not peaceful, and Kratos is aware of this. After more taunting, Baldur strikes Kratos before Kratos gives him one last chance to leave their home. After Baldur strikes him three more times, Kratos finally fights back. Lending itself to the rhetoric of self-defense that I briefly discussed earlier, Kratos' reluctance to engage in combat provides the player with more context in regards to how Kratos approaches or views violence. *God of War* provides a roadmap for acceptable violence by triangulating Kratos' comments about fighting for survival, his distaste for senseless violence, and his introduction to Baldur.

While the broader scope of violence will be covered when discussing Baldur's masculinity in Chapter 3, it is important to note that the role of video game violence is not always agreed upon in scholarly literature. Especially in video games which include violence, media struggle to depict healthy relationships of parents with their children (Stang, 2017). Stang's article indicates that video games are following a trend known as "Dadification" or "The Daddening," which are used to describe the increased presence of father figures in games. Stang specifically uses the examples of *The Walking Dead*, *Bioshock 2*, *Bioshock: Infinite*, and *The Last of Us* for their analysis, ultimately concluding that *The Walking Dead* is the only one of the four games that features a progressive relationship between the father figure and daughter figure because violence does not have to be used. Using Stang's analysis, it is most certain that *God of War* does not feature a "progressive relationship" in the political sense, as violence is the primary means of advancing through the story. There are many fights, both mundane and unique, that are

unavoidable. Stang calls for a “maturation” of video games, but *God of War* does not meet their standards. However, this does not condemn *God of War* to championing toxic relationships; instead, it further brings into question Kratos’ use of self-defense and violence.

In the United States, self-defense is not only cultural, but it is written into law. Usually, it is used in court to determine whether a defendant acted in self-defense. That is, a defendant used appropriate measures to defend one’s life, and while this explanation seems straight forward, defining self-defense is anything but. Janine Young Kim (2008) highlights that defensive violence is inherently masculine and that, “countering unjust violence with just violence evokes romanticized images of the cowboy or adventure” (266). This seems fitting for many video games, especially *God of War*. Without dipping too much into criminal law, moral uncertainties force us, the audience (or in court, the jury), to weigh harm versus harm. Kim argues that in order to decide which harm is worse, we have to assign value to the moral compass of the parties involved and the amount of harm intended or anticipated. In addition, Kim argues that, “If we are committed to the idea that good reasons can sometimes justify harmful acts, as self-defense law seems to suggest, then there is no reason to think that the range of justified killings is fixed” (Kim, 2008, 286). I would like to take this analysis into account when discussing Kratos’ use of violence. Looking at the moral uncertainty of Kratos’ “self-defense,” it seems clear that Kratos’ and Atreus’ lives are at stake multiple times throughout the game, especially whenever they encounter Baldur. The only way out of many of these situations was by using violence. Moore’s (2017) analysis articulates that in some games, performances of masculinity reflect the cultures in which they were developed. Similarly to the Japanese games championing self-defense relating to Japan’s cultural pacifism, *God of War* depicts self-defense and masculinity that are familiar to hegemonic masculinity in the United States. While self-

defense is inherently masculine, Kratos engages in self-defense in a way that is not easily identifiable in the material world. This disconnect from what is likely to happen in *God of War* and what is likely to happen in the material world is up to the player to identify, as any attempt to blatantly make this statement would likely ruin immersive aspects important to the game. Here, as elsewhere in the game, the player is asked to read their own interpretations into the game's arguments about masculinity.

Regardless of a player's feelings about self-defense, it is unavoidable in the game. If the player chooses to not use violence, Kratos will die, resulting in the player returning to the nearest checkpoint. This will become an endless loop until the player either chooses not to play the game anymore or gives into using self-defensive violence to progress through the game. This is a unique form of procedural rhetoric that cannot be found in traditional media. The plot of a novel or film (with a few notable exceptions) is not dependent on the audience's choices. While the death of Kratos might not hold the same weight because the player is aware of its impermanence, it does signify to the player what is required: violence. The scene in which Baldur is introduced, followed by the immediate battle between him and Kratos, exemplifies this.

The ending of this fight represents Kratos' reluctance to seek help from others. After Kratos defeats Baldur, an exhausted Kratos limps back to the cabin to find Atreus waiting for him. He calls out for Faye, asking for her guidance in raising Atreus. Interestingly, this calls back to the article mentioned earlier by Rosette et al. (2015), as Kratos' ability to lead and maintain confidence could be called into question. This display by Kratos shows that he is painfully aware that he does not know how to be a father. He needs help, and this is his admission of it. Acknowledging his lack of experience can be a powerful message for the player. Upon returning to Atreus, Atreus reveals that he could hear his conversation with Baldur, but no

indication is made regarding whether or not Atreus could hear Kratos asking Faye for help. Kratos likely would not want Atreus to hear his plea, because just as showing empathy or compassion would have comforted Atreus, hearing Kratos' plea could have shattered the hyper masculine illusion that Kratos has crafted in front of his son. This suggests Kratos is aware of the social stigma involving men's competence when they ask for help that is outlined in the article from Rosette et al. Because no one outside of the player hears this plea, the call for help does not manifest explicitly in *God of War*. However, Kratos does later seek help from Freya, but only when Atreus' life is at stake. Similarly to the player's inability to manage Atreus' wellbeing in the game, Kratos cannot help his son when it matters the most. Initially, *God of War's* procedures seem to indicate that parenting is only important when the child is in danger. As mentioned in Chapter 1, this is also how the player engages with parenting. Atreus' near-death experience shows the player what happens when this hyper masculine parenting style comes to fruition; this style of parenting leads to death. Ironically, Kratos must venture to the underworld to save his son from death, but masculinity and death are covered in greater depths in Chapter 3. Kratos finally asking for help is a nod to the difficulty of raising a child alone, and in extreme circumstances, help is required for the child's safety and wellbeing.

### **Atreus, The Rebellious Son**

Atreus' interpretation of what is right and what is wrong is heavily dependent on what he sees as successful or admirable. Throughout *God of War*, there are numerous scenes and moments where Atreus demonstrates that he is learning. Much of it falls under the umbrella of masculine performances, and much like a child in the material world, Atreus is impressionable and can be quick to make judgements. Atreus' relationship with Kratos is heavily influenced by hegemonic masculine norms that Kratos forces onto his son in addition to traditional father-son

roles that are found in other media. This section explores pivotal moments in Atreus' development and is especially concerned with how his relationship with his father is shaped by masculinity.

To fully contextualize Atreus' development in *God of War*, it is important to remember that Atreus' bond with his late mother was immeasurably stronger than his bond with his father. This relationship grows in front of the player. For both Kratos and Atreus, this is new territory. Referencing the deer hunt, Atreus wants nothing more than to prove he will not be a burden for Kratos. He looks for affirmation, but Kratos rarely gives it. In that introductory chapter of the game, Kratos scolds Atreus for overly anticipating the hunt, which leads to Atreus missing his first shot and thus alarming the deer of their presence. This short scene is important for two reasons: the first is that it exposes more of Kratos' parenting style to the player, and the second is that it shows the player a better glimpse of what their relationship looks like. Throughout the game, Atreus makes numerous mistakes that Kratos deems punishable, but his punishment is never physical. Kratos never strikes Atreus. The closest thing to physical violence against Atreus is a life or death encounter with Baldur, which I detail later in this chapter. In contrast to "punishing" children physically, the more progressive approach is communicating with them (Gentzler et al., 2005; Kent-Walsh et al., 2010). The Gentzler et al. article indicates that communicating emotions openly with children increases negative emotion coping strategies. In addition, a healthy relationship is easier to obtain when conversation is conducted more openly (Kelly et al., 2002). Kratos is no expert in child development, but his philosophy is apparently not one of physical force. For example, Kratos makes it clear why he is angry, which is a relatively open form of communication considering Kratos' almost permanent stoicism. Again,



Atreus wants to be accepted by his father, which leads him to replicate many of his father's actions and sometimes anticipate what his father might do.

Early on in the grand narrative of *God of War*, Atreus' feelings—or at least Kratos—are revealed to the player. After slaying countless Dark Elves, Kratos enters an impossibly white light that acts as a portal to a scene in black and white. The player still has control of Kratos, but they are limited to walking forward. It is never explicitly revealed whether it is one of Kratos' memories or if it is a manifestation of how he thinks Atreus feels about him. In either case, this particular scene is important to the player, to Kratos, and to Atreus. As Kratos walks through this dreamlike sequence, continuity is totally broken while Kratos can hear Atreus talking to someone, presumably Faye. Atreus reflects that he thinks Kratos never wanted him and that they are not alike. At the end of the sequence, it is revealed that Atreus is kneeling at his late mother's side, possibly praying to her spirit. Kratos is then pulled out of the dream sequence by Atreus who reached in to grab him. Thinking that he was only in there for a few moments, Kratos meets Atreus with anger before it is revealed that Kratos was in that sequence for an unspecified amount of time. Atreus had defended himself against numerous Dark Elves, and their bodies lay scattered on the floor. This scene stands out because it is when the player sees Atreus being truly honest with his feelings; Atreus thinks that being like Kratos will win his father's favor. The player's role is to help Kratos explore this dream sequence, which ultimately leads the player and Kratos to Atreus' feelings. Atreus' desire to be like his father resonates with masculine norms in the material world and cannot be overlooked. Sons generally tend to follow in their father's footsteps (Laband & Lentz, 1983). In many cases, sons are expected to take over the family business. In others, they tend to follow similar career patterns as their fathers. In addition, sons are expected to pass on their father's family values (Bjørnholt, 2010). In order to

follow in his father's footsteps or pass down their familial values, Atreus feels like he must perform like his father. The need to perform like his father or demonstrate that he can perform in such manner resonates with hegemonic masculinity.

Atreus' desire to be like his father is more evident in two other scenes. The first is what caused Atreus to fall ill and go unconscious: Kratos' and Atreus' second encounter with Modi, one of Thor's sons. In their first encounter with Modi, he was accompanied by his brother, Magni, but the fight resulted in Magni's death. During the encounter in question, Modi is able to ambush them, catching them off guard and incapacitating Kratos. As they are both subject to Modi, he speaks of one day wanting to wield his father's hammer. While Modi is not central to this thesis, his desire to be like his father certainly resonates with Atreus, possibly influencing Atreus' actions in the next scene that I lay out below. As Modi threatens to kill Kratos, Atreus begins to roar and briefly goes into a state that can only be described as an attempt to achieve Spartan Rage. The movements, animations, and effects are nearly identical to Kratos' activation of Spartan Rage with the exception that Atreus is much smaller. While the activation of Spartan Rage is never completed by Atreus, this scene demonstrates his desire to be like Kratos. Atreus wanted to save himself and his father by being angry. Similarly, hegemonic masculine norms of father-imitation affect both Kratos and Atreus. Importantly, the pressure that Atreus feels to be like his father is a familiar story in the material world. It was not until Atreus had to defend his own life that he erupted in anger, an emotion that Kratos is all too familiar with. Atreus' relationship with anger is explored throughout *God of War* and is key to his development as a young boy. Laband's and Lentz' (1983) analysis of social norms is key here. Atreus' attempt to achieve Spartan Rage is the literal example of following his father's footsteps because of social

norms. Atreus falls unconscious, ultimately leading to the player being prompted to activate Kratos' Spartan Rage. Kratos breaks free and Modi flees, vowing to meet them again.

The second scene occurs after Atreus falls ill and must be left with Freya while Kratos searches for a cure. Upon returning from his quest, Kratos mentions to Freya that Atreus is cursed, which Kratos probably assumed Atreus would not be conscious enough to hear. After leaving Freya's home, Atreus is quiet and upon inquiring why, Atreus says, "You said I was cursed. You think I'm weak, because I'm not like you. I know I was never what you wanted. But after all this, I thought... maybe things were different." This directly comments on the pressure that young men and boys experience to follow in their father's footsteps. Growing up, if there is a father figure around, he is usually the definition of what it means to be a man. He passes down certain values to his son whether he means to or not. These are values that the son assumes are important. Atreus specifically mentions being "weak" and not being what his father wanted, longing to prove himself to his father by embarking on this quest to fulfill his mother's last request. This is because he sees Kratos as strong and is able to overcome impossible tasks. Some of the reasoning behind this could be that because Kratos was not present in Atreus' earlier life, Atreus developed a certain mythos when imagining his father. Atreus wants to follow in his father's footsteps and continue the family business. In *God of War*, the "family business" just happens to be violence, and Atreus' unrealistic ideas of his father mean that his ideal masculinity is unattainable or at least undesirable.

These are values that reify hegemonic masculinity. In *God of War*, Kratos possesses the ability, whether it is through strength, willpower, or through his tools, that allows him to survive in Midgard. *God of War*, being an action/adventure game with progression elements, communicates to the player that violence is necessary, but it also shows the player how pervasive

violence can socialize a child. Because much of the game's progression depends on violence that is controlled by the player, no matter how they engage with that violence or through which tools, the singular end point of *God of War* means the player's engagement with violence socializes Atreus. Berger and Luckmann (1967) explain that in secondary socialization, children are exposed to institutions with which they are not familiar. *God of War* makes it abundantly clear that Atreus' primary socialization, socialization that occurs during the earliest stages of becoming a social being, did not include the institution of violence. In this way, the procedures regarding violence in *God of War* reveal the effects that continuous engagement with the institution of violence can have on the development of a child's psyche. It makes violence the answer to any problem. These procedures place pressure on the player to recognize the potential harms of violence that are not in direct proximity to the violence in question. Put shortly, it asks the player to recognize not just what violence does to whomever is on the receiving end of it, but also how that violence ripples throughout the world.

In what can be considered the beginning of the turning point of Atreus' character development, the second scene concludes with Kratos revealing his godly origins to Atreus. Kratos viewed being a god as a curse. Inversely, this invigorates Atreus. He immediately questions the extent of his power as a god, something that Kratos does not have the answers for. What follows is the increasingly disobedient performance from Atreus resonating with the cliché of the "rebellious son." The rebellious son cliché is centuries old and dates back to at least biblical times (Rosenberg & Rosenberg, 1976). The long and rich history of the rebellious son lends itself as evidence to how cultural norms have evolved very begrudgingly. The basic premise is that a young male deliberately disobeys their parents, and in Atreus' case, it comes from his perception of what it means to be a god; to him, it means he can do whatever he wants.

Playing the part of the rebellious son, Atreus' disobedience becomes increasingly apparent as the player progresses through the main story. One of the most notable scenes in which this occurs is when Atreus kills Modi. In their third and final encounter with Modi, Kratos and Atreus come across a weakened and beaten version of the god. Atreus wants to kill Modi, but Kratos responds, "He is not worth killing." I assume that if Modi was allowed to recover, he would attempt to avenge his brother and regain his father's favor by killing Kratos and Atreus. Atreus disobeys his father and kills Modi. While Kratos scolds Atreus and exclaims, "There are consequences to killing a god," Atreus receives no physical punishment. When Atreus claims that Kratos has been teaching him to kill, Kratos responds, "I've been teaching you to survive." This can also be linked to self-defense rhetoric, as whether violence is required or can be momentarily bypassed seems to be important to Kratos' decision making.

The second and most extreme example of the rebellious son is when Kratos pushes Atreus, trying to keep him out of a fight with Baldur. Kratos immediately tries to apologize, but Atreus, drunk on the idea of being a god, shoots Kratos with an arrow, stunning him and leaving him unable to fend off Baldur. In this scene, Baldur is able to briefly kidnap Atreus while Kratos pursues. The eventual fight leads to all three of them landing in Helheim. While Baldur is missing, Kratos and Atreus luckily land next to each other. Kratos scolds Atreus again, telling him to listen to his father and that his current behavior will not stand. The conversation ends with Kratos saying, "We are here because of you, boy. Never forget that." Atreus' punishment is never physical. The Rosenberg and Rosenberg (1976) article opens with a quotation from the Bible, condoning death by being stoned for not listening to his parents. Obviously, this is a barbaric practice, but the institution of corporal punishment has been long accepted in the United States. While physical pain as punishment for disobedient children is generally on the decline,

the line between child abuse and harsh discipline is thin. Studies show that children who are beaten are more likely to become violent adults (Rodriguez, 2003). Physical punishment for children is also linked to depression and anxiety. Kratos is probably not an expert on mental health, but it is safe to say that he knows striking Atreus would negatively affect their relationship. Luckily, Atreus was able to learn from his actions without physical punishment. After this point, Atreus returns to a somewhat normal, but more respectful version of his former self.

The rebellious son is not only a theme that resonates with hegemonic masculine norms, but it resonates with men who do not want to be like their fathers and men who think they can be better. *God of War* puts Kratos and Atreus in the middle of this position and forces the player to play through it. Here, *God of War* uses procedures in the narrative to engage in traditional masculine motifs. By being one of the key plots of the game, Atreus' transformation and exploration of masculine performances allows the player to critically engage with these performances. The realness and relatability of the rebellious son add to the immersion aspect of *God of War*, making the atmosphere as discussed by Brown and Cairns (2004) much more authentic. Immersion is more than just the literal atmosphere of the game, but it involves realistic characters that work to enhance the atmosphere. This works to make the game's procedures more effective by creating a layered atmosphere. While the rebellious son is more of an analysis on Atreus' character development, at least two other forms of masculinity are explored by *God of War*.

### **Kratos, The Prideful Father**

Acting as a precursor to Kratos' performance of masculinity, *God of War* utilized the deer hunt introduction to offer the player a brief glimpse of how Kratos' masculinity would

affect the game. Throughout the game, Kratos struggles with changing his masculinity, making it difficult for him to navigate parenthood. He is unsure of what he needs to be teaching Atreus and this is evident to the player. Looking back at the game through the deer hunt plot, Kratos' unfamiliarity with his child, his being haunted by his past, his only acting in self-defense, and his ability to show compassion and empathy are all significant motifs for the player to consider.

While each player may interpret the game differently, this section explores my interpretation that Kratos' masculinity grows in many ways, and that this growth as a character and as a man have a significant impact on the player's construction of masculinity.

Starting with Kratos' and Atreus' unfamiliarity with each other, this unfamiliarity goes both ways. Kratos is unfamiliar with Atreus because of the choices that Kratos had made prior to *God of War's* beginning, and Atreus is also unfamiliar with Kratos because of these choices, solidifying Kratos as a secondary parent. Of course, Faye's death is the catalyst for Kratos recognizing that he needs to become a more involved parent, but that recognition does not come to fruition until Freya reinforces that idea. When Atreus is unconscious, Freya tells Kratos that Atreus will always be sick until Kratos tells Atreus the truth of his godly bloodline, prompting the reveal that I already covered in *The Rebellious Son*. Of course, this reveal happens immediately after Kratos recovers the Blades of Chaos, which are needed to survive in Helheim, the underworld of Norse Mythology. Ironically, Kratos must venture to the underworld to save his son from death, but masculinity and death are covered in greater depths in Chapter 3. Importantly, it is safe to assume that Atreus had no idea of the Blades of Chaos. I presume that Atreus knew of Kratos' occupation as a soldier, but obviously not to the extent of violence and death that Kratos is capable of. Kratos explaining to Atreus that he is a god marks the moment

that Kratos becomes more open to Atreus, and thus the gap of unfamiliarity begins to close. This also means that Kratos begins to fall into the role of primary parent.

Another factor in creating emotional distance is that Kratos rarely uses Atreus' name, instead typically referring to him as "boy." Kratos' constant reference to Atreus as "boy" instigated a meme that made a play on the game's title of *God of War*. Gamers, instead, would refer to it as "Dad of Boy." Hundreds of thousands, possibly millions will recognize *God of War* as Dad of Boy (Vincent, 2018), showing the relevance of the meme. More importantly, Kratos' use of "boy" instead of Atreus' name undoubtedly has an effect on their relationship, as it somewhat dissociates Atreus with who he actually is: Kratos' son. As Shakespeare so lucidly noted in *Romeo and Juliet*, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet," (Shakespeare, 1597). The argument here is that the name does not define what the object is, because the reality still exists in which the rose hypothetically has a different name, and we would be able to discuss it based on that hypothetical word. Others argue that names are more important than simply reference (Emmerson, 1984); they establish boundaries of meaning and, in some instances, can project homogeneity. In this sense, the repetition of the word "boy" equalizes Atreus to every other boy in the world, which hinders his ability to develop a close, emotional relationship with his father.

While Emmerson's article is specifically in reference to the naming conventions of cultures in Southeast Asia, the overarching sentiment can be applied to *God of War*. Not only does effectively removing Atreus' name from Kratos' vocabulary create homogeneity of masculine performance, but it also assigns boundaries to what Atreus can be. First, the constant reference to Atreus as "boy" creates meaning in front of the player. Atreus becomes what it means to actually be a boy. Atreus, or Kratos' idea of Atreus, and how Atreus interacts with the



world is how *God of War* tells the player how a boy should behave, an important note to make when considering how video games affect the material world. Secondly and more significantly, Kratos limits the boundaries as to what Atreus *can* be; Atreus can only be a boy. Bucher's (2014) research suggests that understanding masculinity in a father-son relationship is a two-way street; just as Kratos' understanding of masculinity affects Atreus, Atreus' understanding of masculinity also affects Kratos. Bucher adds that the son's masculinity also acts as an extension of the father's masculinity. When coupled with Kratos' repeated use of the word "boy" in place of Atreus' name, it opens the door for projection of certain masculine ideals. Kratos likely projects his own masculinity onto Atreus, something that reifies hegemonic masculine norms. The player witnesses and participates in these interactions between the two. In some cases, Kratos will only signal Atreus when the player prompts him to. For example, scattered throughout Midgard are pieces of lore that only Atreus can understand and interpret for Kratos and the player. Importantly, these are completely optional. If, and only if, the player decides to inspect a piece of lore will Kratos beckon Atreus over, usually with the infamous line, "Boy." These specific procedures build an acceptance of what boyhood is to the player. This narrow interpretation of boyhood offered to the player through procedural participation reifies hegemonic masculinity.

Additionally, replacing Atreus' name with "boy" establishes a hierarchy between Kratos and Atreus. Kratos is a man and Atreus is a boy; Atreus should obey Kratos because Kratos is his father and his elder. It is never explained why Kratos uses "boy" instead of Atreus' name, but it could be because Kratos intentionally wanted to establish this hierarchy since he was not fully present in Atreus' early life. When the rebellious son phase comes to an end, it is because Kratos says to Atreus, "We are here because of you, boy. Never forget that." There is an added

effect in the delivery of this line that places emphasis on “boy,” indicating to Atreus that he is just a boy and solidifying that he does not make decisions. Establishing hierarchy does seem to help Kratos navigate fatherhood, but it resonates with Kratos’ past life as a soldier. In the military, seniority and rank dictate hierarchy, and Kratos could feel the need to establish a relationship that is familiar to him. In any case, hierarchies may not be inherently masculine, but the need to establish dominance, especially between two males, is a norm within hegemonic masculinity (Hinojosa, 2010). Continuing with the above example of Atreus’ ability to interpret lore for Kratos and the player, this also means that the player and Kratos operate on the same plane of the hierarchy. While the narrative establishes Kratos’ dominance in the hierarchy, the procedures establish the player’s. This interpretation suggests that the act of simply playing *God of War* engages with masculinity. Importantly, Kratos does refer to Atreus as “son” in the final scene of the game, and while this still engages in hierarchy, it proves to be a powerful turning point in Kratos’ masculinity. It simultaneously shows Atreus and the player that Kratos approves of Atreus, something that Atreus has longed for since the beginning of the game and probably prior, and that Kratos is accepting his role as an involved father.

One of the key aspects of Kratos’ masculinity is how he engages in violence, and as stated earlier, Kratos champions self-defense in *God of War*. This means that Kratos exclusively engages in violence when it is in self-defense or the defense of another life. Throughout the game, there are a few scenes or moments that exhibit this standard for Kratos. One of which has already been discussed: the scene when Atreus kills Modi. There are two other moments that are especially important; these are the moments when Kratos finally kills Baldur and his decision to not kill Freya. It is important to know that these moments share the same scene, and they occur immediately after the last combat sequence in the game, meaning the player does not have

control in deciding their fates. They are both Kratos' decisions, and these scenes exemplify self-defense violence and loss of control in different ways.

The scene in which Kratos kills Baldur stands out because of how *God of War* takes away the decision from the player. During the first altercation with Baldur, when he is still called "The Stranger," the player is prompted to make Kratos kill Baldur by pressing the L3 and R3 buttons simultaneously. When the player presses these buttons, Kratos breaks Baldur's neck, presumably killing him (it is not until later that Baldur's identity and his curse are revealed). Long before he is introduced to Kratos, Atreus, and the player, Baldur's mother, Freya, enchants him with indestructibility, which unfortunately curses him and removes his ability to feel. After the final boss fight between Kratos and Atreus, Baldur, and Freya, the curse is lifted, and Kratos tells Baldur not to pursue revenge or try to harm him, Atreus, or Freya. Of course, almost immediately after, Baldur confronts Freya, who was earlier revealed to be his mother, and begins choking her to death. It is at this moment that Kratos grapples Baldur and eventually breaks his neck, this time actually killing him. Both of these instances were in defense of one's life; in the first, it was clear that Baldur's violence was relentless and would not stop until Baldur died, and in the other, it was clear that the relentlessness would continue to cause death and destruction unless Baldur was actually killed. However, the key difference is that in the first fight, the player participates in its ending, but in the second, the player does not. It can be easy to forget because these scenes are on opposite ends of the game, but this distinction is important. One could argue that this disengages from procedural rhetoric, because it removes agency from the player, but it makes key points surrounding self-defense and masculinity. This scene is signaling to the player that sometimes not having control or participating in the outcome of certain events is fine, and

the notion that not having control is acceptable will be further explored in Chapter 3. The player is not participating in the defense of Freya's life or the death of Baldur; only Kratos is.

Kratos' decisions regarding *when* to use violence exemplify self-defense throughout *God of War*, and self-defense is significant to Kratos' masculinity. Immediately after Kratos kills Baldur, Freya grieves the death of her son before threatening Kratos and vowing to "parade" his body across the realms. Even though this is a clear threat to Kratos' and Atreus' life, Kratos does not take it as an imminent threat and decides to walk away. These two instances of violence by Kratos clearly show his intention to only use violence in self-defense, even against his most dangerous enemies. Playing the role of a father is unfamiliar territory for Kratos, but engaging in violence allows Kratos to feel familiarity and gives him access to another avenue of masculinity, something that the player actively participates in and is common to hegemonic masculinity (Pope & Englar-Carlson, 2001). *God of War's* procedures allow Kratos' and the player's to engage in self-defense rhetoric thus allowing both to participate in masculinity.

One other key performance of masculinity is worth highlighting because it underscores Kratos' lack of compassion and empathy towards Atreus throughout the game. The accumulation of Kratos' interactions with Atreus maintains emotional distance between the two. After the first fight with Baldur, Atreus inquires about killing people by implying he does not morally agree with it. Kratos' response is, "Close your heart to their desperation. Do not allow yourself to feel for them." This is another way in which Kratos performs masculinity. Emotion regulation, which is common to hegemonic masculinity (Berke et al., 2018), is part of how Kratos justifies his violence. Kratos' emotion regulation is an extreme example, as he expresses his stance on emotions clearly; they are unnecessary to their journey. It is only through small improvements of emotional expression that Kratos is able to truly build a healthy relationship

with Atreus. Earlier, Kratos' lack of compassion and empathy through touch and the inability to comfort Atreus during potentially life changing events showed his hesitancy and unsureness in his abilities as a father. While this leads to Kratos reifying toxic hegemonic masculine norms, he defies these very same norms at the end of the game. As Kratos and Atreus approach the peak of the tallest mountain in all the realms, Kratos stops to remove the wraps on his forearms and reveals the scars from the Blades of Chaos, a terrible reminder of his brutal past. "I have nothing more to hide," he states, verbally revealing to Atreus and the player that he is ready to be more emotionally available as a man. With the analysis from Chapter 1 regarding Kratos' possible feelings of his past life as a soldier, these words also suggest acceptance of that past life, signifying his growth in masculinity. He then lets Atreus carry Faye's ashes until they reach the peak. Upon reaching the peak, they take turns scattering her ashes in the wind, and Kratos places his right arm around Atreus' back, finally showing Atreus that he does have other feelings. When the remainder of Faye's ashes are scattered, they leave the way from which they came with Kratos' hand resting on Atreus' shoulder. This entire scene represents a shift in how Kratos performs masculinity; this shift is powerful because the accumulated experiences of playing the game have given meaning to Kratos' growth. Without the player's procedural participation, this transformation would never take place and could not carry such weight.

The final scene is not just the conclusion of the game, but it also signifies the evolution of Kratos' masculinity, which contains procedures that are especially significant. In the finale of *God of War*, Kratos shows mercy to Baldur, albeit just initially, and Freya. Kratos also acknowledges that Atreus is his son, accepting his past and showing his son compassion. This finale shows significant progress made by Kratos as a man and as a father. At this point in the game, *God of War's* procedures have already created an invested player, one that engages with

masculinity and is engaged with Kratos' transformation. The conclusion of the game is important because it is not only the physical completion of their journey, but it also signifies the evolution of Kratos' masculinity. This makes the game *feel* complete and provides a deep satisfaction for players that are invested in Kratos' and Atreus' relationship, an investment that *God of War's* procedures worked to create in the player since the introduction of the game.

### **A Procedural Relationship**

*God of War* is undoubtedly a game about action, adventure, and violence, but it is also a story of fatherhood and masculinity. Through the relationship between Kratos and Atreus, the player engages with masculinity in a multitude of ways. The introduction of the game offers the player a frame of these masculinities: self-defense violence, fatherhood, emotion, and emotional support. These are all aspects of masculinity that *God of War* enacts via an invested player throughout the game. Kratos and Atreus both experience evolutions in their respective masculine performances. The player is asked to participate with these evolutions, and through procedural rhetoric, the player is asked to recognize the harms of hegemonic masculinity in the material world.

The relationship that is being built is not just between Kratos and Atreus, but the player as well. The player's participation in their relationship fluctuates throughout the game; the game gives the player some opportunities to make decisions. On the other end of the relationship, Kratos and Atreus both make decisions that affect the player. In turn, they are encouraged to become invested in Kratos' and Atreus' relationship with one another, and this investment builds the empathetic connection with the game that is discussed earlier. The key to the player's investment is the authenticity and relatability of both Kratos' and Atreus' performances of masculinity. Both of their performances of masculinity are recognizable to the player in the

material world and thus further legitimize the atmosphere of the game. This amplifies the procedural rhetoric in *God of War*.

Kratos and Atreus both learn from one another, which is one healthy aspect of their relationship and performances of masculinity. There are valuable lessons to be learned about both characters as Atreus progresses through his performance of the rebellious son. Atreus learns for himself and teaches the player the necessity of restraint, while Kratos learns how to perform as a father in a way that encourages growth. The performance of the rebellious son by Atreus undoubtedly influences Kratos' actions in the following scenes of the game as he recognizes that his masculinity, not just his violence, has broader proximal ramifications than he originally thought. Kratos is teaching Atreus through his actions, which is especially significant considering Kratos' initial lack of communication. To complete the game, the player's role is to guide them through these transformations. However, the game also guides the player to come to their own conclusions about masculinity and fatherhood. These grander procedures, in addition to the smaller procedures which I have already discussed, give the player additional knowledge of the relationship between fatherhood and masculinity, knowledge that informs their interpretations of how those relationships function in the material world.

## CHAPTER 3: THE ANTI-FATHER

### Introducing the Anti-Father

*God of War* features diverse performances of masculinities. Most notable are Kratos' and Atreus', but another important performance of masculinity and fatherhood is that of Baldur, the antagonist of the game. Lucat (2017) identifies a key term for games with fatherhood-centric narratives: the anti-father. Lucat defines the anti-father as "models of flawed hegemonic masculinity and paternity that let the protagonist fathers define their own approaches to paternity in opposition to them" (2017, 2). In short, the anti-father represents an alternative performance of masculinity, one that heavily contrasts with the protagonist's masculinity in some way. As I argue in this chapter, *God of War* includes an anti-father in Baldur, offering a distinct and noteworthy performance of masculinity.

Baldur's masculinity contrasts with Kratos' in a multitude of ways, but it is important to note that they both represent flawed forms of hegemonic masculinity; the key difference is that Baldur performs a consistently toxic version of masculinity. Baldur pursues violence and represents a complete lack of emotion outside of anger. His invasive personality ensures that others are subject to his masculine performance. In the previous chapter, I argued that Kratos' engagement of self-defense violence means he does not actively pursue violence. Emotionally, Kratos and Baldur are both extremely familiar with anger, but how they cope with those emotions is very different. Kratos utilizes stoicism; inversely, Baldur is anything but stoic: he is abrasive, loud, and unforgiving. This chapter unpacks how *God of War* uses procedures to exhibit an almost completely negative performance of masculinity through Baldur.

There are three key interactions in *God of War* in which Baldur's masculinity is brought to the spotlight. In these moments, the game's portrayal of Baldur's masculinity is made very



clear; Baldur's behavior is destructive, unproductive, and overall negative. Kupers (2005) explains that "toxic masculinity involves the need to aggressively compete and dominate others and encompasses the most problematic proclivities in men" (713). From the moment that Baldur enters Kratos' and Atreus' lives, he competes with and attempts to dominate both of them. Much of the conflict of *God of War* comes from their resistance to him. Through procedures, *God of War* offers the player a schema in the form of Baldur that articulates how not to behave, thus encouraging the player to identify more with Kratos' masculinity. This schema is made possible by the actions the player is forced to take and the situations the player is forced to deal with. As the player progresses through *God of War*, their experiences with Baldur shape their interpretation of gender performance. This chapter thus explores how Baldur's masculinity affects himself and those he interacts with, altering the gendered performances of Kratos, Atreus, and even prompting dialogues within the player through procedural rhetoric.

### **Baldur, The Anti-Father**

Originally introduced to Kratos, Atreus, and the player as "The Stranger," they only discover Baldur's history and backstory as the game progresses. Baldur transforms from completely unknown to one of the most infamous gods in Norse Mythology. As they gain knowledge of who Baldur is, perspective on him changes. Baldur's behavior does not change throughout the game, but the characters and the player learning of his god-hood is important to their interpretation of his masculine performance. Baldur's god-hood simultaneously establishes him as a force to be reckoned with and also guarantees the importance of his masculinity. The reveal that The Stranger is actually Baldur, the Norse god, is one of the procedures of *God of War* that solidifies the importance of masculinity. It signifies to the characters and the player

that they should pay attention to Baldur and gives them an alternative framework of a possible way to behave.

Baldur's involvement begins early on in the game, immediately after the deer scene, which functions as both the tutorial and introduction. One of the first things that Baldur says to Kratos is that he thought Kratos would be taller, which is ironic because Kratos is much larger than Baldur. Size is important to hegemonic masculinity in a variety of ways, most notably body size (Holzleitner et al., 2014) and penis size (Lever et al., 2006; Veale et al., 2014). Each of the studies listed quantify perceived masculinity based on size in their respective studies. Larger bodies correlated with a higher perceived masculinity for men, and self-reported penis size correlated positively with body image. Furthermore, physical stature in men is also associated with authority and competency (Hermanussen & Scheffler, 2019). Baldur's reference to size when confronting Kratos for the first time is no accident. He is attacking Kratos' masculinity. This competition of masculinity that Baldur brings forth is another example of his performance of hegemonic masculinity (Soulliere, 2006). Soulliere's article specifically focuses on the dramatization of the World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), in which individual competitors will routinely demonstrate "manhood" through means of trash talk. This brief dialogue is akin to something expected to occur at an elementary school playground, but it also gives Kratos, Atreus, and the player a brief glimpse into Baldur's overall performance of masculinity. Because this form of communication is easily identifiable in the material world, the player can make value judgments on Baldur from this introductory interaction.

The ensuing fight places more emphasis on the contrast between Baldur's and Kratos' masculinity. Previously discussed was Kratos' emphasis on self-defense, but Baldur's violence is the opposite. Instead of being cautious, he is reckless. Instead of defending, he is

antagonizing. In fact, Baldur often does not attempt to block Kratos' attacks, instead opting to take them in full force. Pulling from Moore's (2017) and Giroux (1995) analysis discussed earlier, Kratos and Baldur's use of violence is more than just a mechanical process, but it is also a reflection of their respective performances of masculinity. Not only is Baldur's violence aggressive, but so is his masculine performance. Multiple times throughout the fight, Baldur exclaims that he does not feel *anything*. Kratos, Atreus, and the player will later learn that not only is he referring to pain, but he is also referring to emotions. Not only does the lack of showing emotions resonate with hegemonic masculinity (Emslie et al., 2006), but *God of War* showcases this masculinity at an extreme by using Baldur as a conduit to display what being physically unable to experience emotions looks like. Lucat's (2017) article also explains that anti-fathers must also present "procedural methods of abjection employed to make these characters antithetical to the more positive versions of fatherhood that these games attempt to present through their protagonists," (7). Chapter 2 already established Kratos' emotional range, but during this fight, Kratos shows anger and fear, and he begins to appear exhausted. Inversely, Baldur's efforts are relentless, and while there is the obvious clash between two powerful gods, this fight also represents the need for Baldur's masculinity to consume Kratos'. Even in Kratos' lack of emotional range, his masculinity is portrayed positively because of how negatively Baldur's comes across, and this solidifies Baldur as the anti-father.

One of the unique facets of this fight is that neither Kratos, Atreus, nor the player know who Baldur is during this fight, and that plays a key role in their interpretations of this fight and their interactions with Baldur. The most obvious reaction is confusion; who is he? What does he want? How is he so powerful? These are all questions that are answered as the player progresses through the game, but the initial not knowing of who he is plays on human the nature

to fear uncertainty, a common threat to one's masculinity (Day et al., 2003). Furthermore, this interaction with Baldur is what forces Kratos and Atreus to leave their home earlier than Kratos anticipated. Day et al.'s research suggests that being in unfamiliar places is another common threat to masculinity. This also relates to what Goetz (2017) refers to as "leaving the nest," an important moment that most players are probably familiar with from other games. Leaving the nest symbolizes the player's readiness to leave safety and venture into the outside world. Kratos does return to their cabin once in *God of War*, and he does so to recover the Blades of Chaos. The player has the option to return to the cabin, but the site offers Kratos, Atreus, and the player nothing of value. Even in the absence of value to the player, it can rhetorically shape how the player views "the home." Instead of viewing the home as a place of comfort, Kratos seems to view it as a tool, which comes as no surprise considering the first chapter of this thesis. Having the ability to return to their home, only for it to offer the player nothing in terms of progressing in the story, discourages the player from returning. Earlier, I discussed how *God of War* heavily implies that Kratos was an absent father before Faye's passing. Kratos' relationship with home coupled with him not feeling safe accumulate to his stubbornness in returning. In addition, *God of War*'s procedures involving Kratos' and Atreus' home mean that the player also views the home as unnecessary to the journey. Baldur's appearance at their front door added to an unstable homelife that the player continues to participate in throughout the game. In short, not knowing who Baldur was or what his intentions were threatened Kratos' masculinity and led to his decision to venture into unknown territory. Kratos' reluctance to return home, which offered nothing of substance to the player, ensured Kratos would continue to stay away from home. This, of course, is not the case: only when returning home finally offers the Blades of Chaos to Kratos and the player.

While Atreus' time with Baldur is limited in this interaction, he undoubtedly picks up on Baldur's masculinity, influencing his actions and behaviors. Two things are key here: first, Atreus is exposed to another performance of masculinity, one that is somewhat similar to his father's, and second, Baldur is a god. The exposure to alternative masculinity is especially important because an impressionable young boy like Atreus could conflate the two masculinities with one another, making both seem as acceptable avenues of expression. While this may be the case for Atreus, this is not the case for the player. In many ways, Atreus' curiosity and enthusiasm can run parallel with the player, but the distinction between these two masculinities is made clear to the player by the game's procedures. Baldur is not a playable character; only Kratos is, making the player connect more with Kratos' performance of masculinity and villainizing Baldur's. Because of the relationship that Kratos and the player share with one another, the player is tacitly asked to endorse the masculinity performed by Kratos, the playable character. Some video game scholars refer to this as "player-avatar relationships," which represent an intimate emotional bond that players have with their player characters (Banks & Bowman, 2013). Baldur is cast aside as the Other, representing an undesired performance of masculinity. In addition, losing to Baldur equates to his masculinity's victory over Kratos', which sets the player back and halts progression in *God of War*. Baldur being cast as the Other, along with the player investing in Kratos' masculinity reduces the likelihood that the player can conflate Kratos' and Baldur's masculinities in the way that Atreus can. The second thing to consider when discussing Baldur's influence on Atreus from this point is that when they learn of Baldur's actual identity, Atreus instantly believes that this is how gods behave. Gods do whatever they want, and those who are weaker than the gods are subject to the gods' will. This

godlike behavior then transforms from abstract knowledge into a concrete lesson when Atreus learns that he is also a god, encouraging his performance as the rebellious son.

The second interaction with Baldur to be discussed is Kratos' and Atreus' second fight with Baldur. Chapter 2 covered this interaction briefly, but to re-contextualize the buildup to this moment, this fight occurs during the climax of Atreus' performance of the rebellious son and results in the end of this performance. In this interaction Baldur refers to Kratos' perceived lack of intelligence no less than twice and praises the "the boy" as the brains. The player's entire participation in this fight occurs when Kratos and Baldur are brawling on the back of a dragon. The player, as Kratos, must trade punches with Baldur in a more confined form of gameplay. The player is responsible for dodging Baldur's blows while Baldur is mounted on Kratos and also responsible for landing blows when Kratos is mounted over Baldur. These procedures limit combat versatility and force the player to engage in a more intimate interrogation of violence. The combat is slower, closer, and heavier. Baldur and Kratos scream at each other; the former yelling, "Why won't you just die?!" and the latter exclaiming, "Leave my son alone!" Both Baldur and Kratos are upholding their masculinity as a warrior and protector respectively. These masculine constructs, Myrntinen argues, "[rely] on the suppression of others" (2003, 37). Baldur and Kratos are trying to suppress one another, establishing dominance as violently as possible. Eventually, their fight causes the dragon to crash land and presumably die, which is when Baldur opens the gate to Helheim. Here, competing hegemonic masculinities result in death and destruction. While travelling through the portal, Kratos is able to kick Baldur away, forcing Baldur's landing zone far from his and Atreus'. The result is the ending of Atreus' rebellious son phase and also the beginning of Kratos' second escape from Helheim.

During this fight, Baldur brings out the worst in Kratos. Kratos reveals his own recklessness, and this is the only time in which Kratos physically confronts Atreus, albeit just to push Atreus to safety. Kratos not only destroys the portal to their destination, but he attempts to destroy the Bifrost, a method of travelling between the realms in Norse Mythology. While the player should recognize Kratos' violence as a defining character trait at this point, there is a sense of uncertainty in regards to completing the game's overall objective specifically because of Kratos' actions. The player does not have any control over these actions, so in these moments, they are subject to Kratos' desires. Here, *God of War's* procedures put the player in unfavorable conditions, much like Baldur's appearance influencing Kratos to begin their journey before he felt Atreus was ready. While hindsight is 20/20, any and all of the player's uncertainty caused by Kratos' actions in turn causes the player to question alternative ways to solve problems. Moments like these lift, at least briefly, the veil of hegemonic masculinity Kratos, Atreus, and the player now literally have to fight their way through in the underworld, because of three competing masculinities: Kratos', Baldur's, and Atreus'. These procedures seem to indicate that hegemonic masculinity leads to death, or at least is closely linked to it. The notion that hegemonic masculinity and death are linked is no stranger to gender studies research. Life expectancy for men is shorter than life expectancy for women (Wang et al., 2013); moreover, "The rate of violent deaths is significantly higher among men than among women" (Sheehan et al., 2013, 548). This fight seems to indicate that failure and death because of hegemonic masculinity are questions of when, not if. This is because hegemonic masculinity often leads to violence.

### Conquering the Anti-Father

The third and final fight involving Baldur is a key development in the game's positioning of hegemonic masculinity. The battle involves Kratos, Atreus, Baldur, and Freya. During the battle, Freya controls the corpse of the Thamur, a renowned giant that was hundreds of feet tall, in an attempt to keep Kratos and Baldur from killing each other. She also continuously tries to incapacitate Kratos by causing underground roots to surround and tighten around him. While Kratos cannot escape the roots, Baldur punches Atreus and is pierced by Mistletoe, breaking Baldur's curse of invulnerability. Baldur exclaims that he can finally feel, but without his invulnerability, the player, as Kratos, defeats him in combat. As Kratos begins choking Baldur to death, Atreus pleads, "He's beaten, father... not a threat," prompting Kratos to demand Freya's safety before releasing him. Completely helpless, the player is again subject to Kratos' will. This is an important moment in fatherhood for Kratos. Atreus suggests the lessons that Kratos had previously tried to teach him. Moschis (1985) suggests that learning and socialization from parent to child is "situation-specific," ultimately supporting the notion that some of Kratos' lessons regarding violence have impacted Atreus. This realization of the effects of family communication and interpersonal communication is shared by Kratos and the player. Additionally, Kratos' display of restraint is an homage to how he *feels* about control; control is important. However, just as violence and masculinity both exist on spectrums, so too does control of any situation. The player needs to recognize that these subjects are not binary; rather, they are dynamic. This thesis has already discussed the various degrees to which the player can control Kratos at different points in the game, but this specific moment of helplessness creates an intensity within the player. Baldur's emphasis on control is not of feeling it is important, but rather feeling it is required. The difference is that Kratos and the player both sacrifice control in



situations that require it; Baldur, even when his life depends on it, refuses to let go of control. In the ensuing seconds, Baldur voices his frustration with Freya, his mother, for his suffering. This is when Baldur attempts to complete his revenge against Freya, forcing Kratos to finally kill him. The scene finishes with Freya grieving the death of Baldur and threatening Kratos' life. These threats, which I have covered in detail in Chapter 2, are procedurally vital, offering a window into Kratos' masculine fatherhood.

In his final act, Baldur forces Kratos to make a decision that calls into question previous lessons that Kratos tried to teach Atreus. While Kratos clearly does not have a rule against killing, if Modi's death is recalled, Kratos speaks of unspecified consequences to killing a god. In this scenario, either Kratos lied about potential consequences or the potential consequences do not outweigh the value of life, both of which establish hierarchies for Kratos. They establish Kratos as the dominant masculine force in his family unit and cement Kratos' masculinity as stronger than Baldur's. While the game does not explicitly state what is to come in terms of consequences, it can be assumed that someone, either a god or multiple gods, will be seeking revenge against Kratos. Kratos deciding to kill Baldur is also indicative that he does not fear those potential consequences. Similarly to Freya's threats, which I covered in Chapter 2, Kratos here places emphasis on the proximity of consequences more so than the magnitude of consequences.

While Kratos' violence always seems to be driven by self-defense, much of Baldur's is driven by revenge, another contrasting trait of their masculinities. Take into consideration the scene in which Kratos has the ability to kill Baldur but chooses not to. Earlier, I analyzed how this plays into Kratos' self-defense rhetoric, only for Baldur to immediately force Kratos' hand by attempting to murder a defenseless Freya. This is an act of revenge. Berkowitz and Cornell

(2005) argue that “What vengeance offers in response to trauma and loss is the fantasy of control” (316). Kratos’ initial resistance to acting vengefully displays control as unnecessary and as an action of non-hegemonic masculinity. Baldur’s need for revenge is a symptom of his need for control. Berkowitz and Cornell continue, “externalizing harm as a result not of one’s own weakness but of another’s wrong, the avenging victim both restores his injured pride and steels himself from self-blame and self-destruction” (317). In short, obtaining revenge against Freya would relieve Baldur of his past actions. These actions are never explicitly stated but granting Baldur a motive makes him a more dynamic character, and it is significant to elevating the importance of Baldur’s performance of masculinity. Similarly to the relatability of the rebellious son, avoiding blame can resonate with players of this game, which again adds to the layer of realness and desired atmosphere to maintain immersion.

A dynamic masculinity for Baldur builds *God of War*’s procedures in two ways: first, relatability to Baldur’s masculinity creates empathy with Baldur, and second, it allows *God of War* to build upon the relatability of Kratos’ and Atreus’ masculinities by making their interactions with Baldur feel real. Having nuanced characters makes *God of War*’s procedures even stronger, feeding the immersive atmosphere by making the characters feel like real people. This enhances the empathetic connection with the procedures of the game, thus increasing the persuasiveness of those procedures. The player is encouraged to engage in internal dialogues regarding Baldur’s masculinity; why is he the way that he is? Pinpointing his performance of masculinity to a certain point in time would be impossible, even if the player had access to Baldur’s entire history. However, this basic inquiry of Baldur’s performance is one way in which *God of War* interrogates hegemonic masculinity.

The relationship between revenge and control can affect the player, especially in this scene. In Chapter 2: Building the Relationship, I briefly mentioned the contrast between the ending of Kratos' and Baldur's first fight with the ending of their last fight. In the first fight, the player controls Kratos as he presumably kills Baldur, but in the last fight, Kratos acts on his own. Here, the game literally takes control away from the player. Because this is clearly not gameplay, it could be argued that this removal of agency is a moment that separates the game's procedures and ventures into straightforward storytelling. Browning (2016) argues against "anti-cuts scene rhetoric" and instead opts to place equal importance on gameplay and cutscenes. While the distinction between gameplay and cutscene is somewhat muddled because of the seamless camera in *God of War*, the contrast between giving the player the power to end Baldur's life in the first fight with removing the player's involvement in the last fight cannot go unnoticed. This was very likely intentional, as designing the scenes in this way removes an element from the game which the player expects to be available to them. Browning furthers that gameplay events within cutscenes compel the player to hold onto their controller, which continues their participation. Kratos *could have* killed Baldur earlier, and the player would have been ready for it, but killing Baldur at that moment would have been a vengeful act. Killing him then would have been fueled by the pain that Baldur had imposed on Kratos and Atreus. Removing the player's control when Kratos finally does kill Baldur to preserve Freya's life takes the option of revenge away from the player, a powerful moment that solidifies Kratos', Atreus', and Baldur's relationship.

Ultimately, it is Freya who suffers from the death of Baldur. *God of War* implies that Baldur and Freya have not had any meaningful relationship in ages, something that causes them both to suffer. Baldur's heart is filled with hate because he feels betrayed by his own mother,

and Freya grieves her relationship with her son because she feels he will never forgive her in her lifetime. Freya's assumption is probably correct considering that if Kratos had let Baldur have his way, the last thing Freya would have experienced was the unforgivable relentlessness of her son. Here, *God of War* places emphasis on the delicacy of the parent-child relationship, ultimately showing that even if parents have good intentions, their actions can backfire. Freya's grief highlights the destructiveness of Baldur's masculinity, which proves to be even more destructive than Kratos' even when Kratos destroyed multiple key artifacts of progression. While it seems obvious that Kratos' hands were forced by Baldur's persistence to end Freya's life, Freya does not accept this point of view. In her grieving, it is clear that she would gladly give her life if it meant Baldur could continue living. At one point, Kratos tells Atreus that he would do the same for him. After all, it is normal for parents to feel like protectors (Suter et al., 2011), and in the unfortunate event that harm comes to their children, any number of negative emotions would be justified. For Freya, they are rage and grief. Baldur's masculinity is his undoing, and his mother suffers because of it. The player, by extension, suffers through empathy, having been asked to understand Baldur's masculinity as extremely toxic.

### **Baldur's Role**

Throughout *God of War*, Baldur's masculinity continues to contrast with Kratos', providing the player with the necessary framing to compare and contrast two different performances of hegemonic masculinity. Much of this chapter has explored the relationship between Kratos' and Baldur's masculinities. While they are both destructive, these comparisons spotlight the degree to which different performances can negatively affect the men with whom they resonate. Without Baldur, it might prove difficult to imagine a more hyper masculine performance than Kratos'. Because Baldur acts as a catalyst for the violence throughout *God of*

*War*, his existence frames Kratos' masculinity in a less negative light and provides some much-needed context of the spectrum of masculinity. The addition of Baldur's masculinity shows Kratos, Atreus, and the player that revenge is a path of destruction, something that Kratos even states shortly before killing Baldur. The player's feelings towards Kratos' and Baldur's performances of masculinity are affected by what Lewis et al. (2008) call the "internalization and psychological merging of a player's and a character's mind." The player is compelled to agree with Kratos' performance. Absent Baldur, key moments which inform Atreus and the player of Kratos' masculinity would never happen, reducing the player's ability to empathize with the procedures of *God of War*.

Although Baldur's masculinity is more destructive for both himself and those around him, his performance is able to bring out the worst aspects of Kratos' masculinity, truly making him an anti-father. He worsens Kratos' violence, sometimes to the point where he acts uncontrollably and against his own standards. This sort of unintentional manipulation of masculinity shows the fragility of hegemonic masculinities to all parties involved: Kratos, Atreus, Baldur, and the player. In most cases, character evolution is important to show the protagonist in a positive framing, and *God of War* is no different. Both Kratos' and Atreus' masculinities progress away from hegemonic masculinities through character arcs that only occur because of Baldur's performance. These character arcs were key to their survival. Unfortunately for Baldur, he never seems to learn from the mistakes of his own masculinity, ultimately leading to his death and ensuring Freya's suffering. Furthermore, Baldur also offers the player a schema of how not to behave. It is easy to say that revenge should not be sought, but merely saying would not have the same effect as showing it through Baldur as a performance of tragedy.

The procedures involving the anti-father are interesting. The mystery of his identity increases uncertainty within the player, and Kratos' uncertainty functionally begins their journey by forcing them to leave their home. Kratos does not seem to value a home and *God of War* forces the player to participate in this devaluation. Additionally, when the three masculinities collide during Kratos' second fight with Baldur, *God of War* reveals the painful future of hegemonic masculine performances: death and destruction. This is confirmed when Kratos finally kills Baldur, whose masculinity is certainly more extreme than Atreus' and even Kratos'. The lack of player participation in Baldur's death is a procedure within itself; this is especially important because the game had previously given that participation to the player. Through this, *God of War* creates a loss of control for the player. This goes against hegemonic masculine norms surrounding the concept of control and forces itself onto the player, creating a powerful opportunity to recognize that sometimes control is not necessary. The irony of not being able to control a video game is important to the arguments constructed in *God of War*. As displayed by Baldur, yearning for control leads to violence and suffering, climaxing with his death. Had he accepted that some things are out of his control, his fate would have concluded differently, changing the outcomes of his life and his mother's. Baldur's performance of masculinity is necessary to *God of War*'s interpretations of masculinity; his performance as the anti-father is an important rhetorical device that *God of War* does not waste.

## CONCLUSION

### **Powerful Procedures and Complex Masculinities**

*God of War* uses procedural rhetoric to interrogate different performances of hegemonic masculinity. While the most concrete examples of hegemonic masculinity are probably Kratos' and Baldur's, the player is offered a more fluid performance of masculinity through Atreus. It is because of Atreus that the player is able to draw interpretations about hegemonic masculinities both in the game and in the material world. Absent Atreus, Kratos and Baldur likely perform differently, but the effects of their performances would not be as pervasive. Kratos and Baldur share many similarities; they both engage in violence. They both place limits on their capacities to experience emotions, and they affect the evolution of Atreus' performance of masculinity. The important distinction is that they engage with all of these in different ways. Thus, the player can make direct comparisons, enriching the value and increasing the intensity of the player's interpretations of the characters' masculine performances. While interpretations about masculinity will vary depending on the player, *God of War* undoubtedly points the players in a particular direction through its procedures. In this thesis, I covered how the game's tools and key performances and character arcs of masculinity by Kratos, Atreus, and Baldur all contribute to the pervasiveness of masculinity in *God of War*.

After careful analysis in these chapters, returning to the research questions from earlier is warranted. Starting with (1) How does hegemonic masculinity inform the narratives of *God of War*? Through tools and characters in *God of War*, different performances of masculinity affect players' interpretations differently, but the narratives in *God of War* seem to point the players to at least one specific conclusion: hegemonic masculinity is harmful to men. *God of War* builds

procedures that support this argument through masculine performances by Kratos, Atreus, and Baldur. In order to build these procedures, the game *must* engage in hegemonic masculine norms, such as violence and hierarchy. The game asks players to create and enact patriarchal hierarchies through violence and power. Yet, it also subverts some of the norms of masculinity, possibly offering the player some nuance. Spartan Rage is a tool at Kratos' and the player's disposal which directly engages in emotional expression that favors hegemonic masculinity. However, because anger is really the only emotion he visibly expresses to Atreus, his ability to develop a healthy relationship with Atreus is constantly at stake. Throughout the game, Kratos shows glimpses of other emotions, but they are locked behind his stoic performance, and the player observes how suppressing these emotions harm Kratos' and Atreus' relationship. Kratos also emotionally distances himself from Atreus, making any attempt to chip away at his wall of stoicism even more difficult. Furthermore, take Kratos' and Baldur's performances of masculinity that are respectively analyzed in chapters 2 and 3; these are two competing performances of masculinity that, when pressed up against one another, display the varying degrees of harm that hegemonic masculinity inflicts. They are both violent, powerful, seemingly emotionless, and nigh indestructible. The player participates in this competition of masculinities as they both struggle to dominate the other. Of course, the player naturally has a vested interest in Kratos' masculinity, thus engaging in hegemonic masculinity and providing the player with opportunities to interrogate Kratos' performance. Baldur's performance of the anti-father both acts as another representation of hegemonic masculinity and provides a necessary frame that paints Kratos' performance of masculinity as positive. "Positive" is being used very loosely, as this means that even "positive" performance of hegemonic masculinity is harmful to those that



interact with its host. It is the close relationship with hegemonic masculinity that makes *God of War* rhetorically important.

(2) What role does violence play in the game's depiction of fatherhood? Violence is not only the game's most pervasive means of progression, but self-defense violence is also the primary way in which Kratos expresses himself. *God of War* depicts fatherhood similarly to many other forms of traditional media: as a protector. While it is important to remember that violence is required by *God of War*, the procedures in *God of War* also suggest that violence alone is not enough to be a healthy fatherly role model. If *God of War* had depicted fatherhood as only violence, the game would not contain the conflicts that are represented throughout the game, most notably the rebellious son. The Leviathan Axe and the Blades of Chaos both primarily serve as weapons that Kratos and the player use to engage in violence, but they also contribute to how Kratos and the player interact with the world. Kratos cannot be *only* violent, because his weapons provide more than that. They provide Atreus and the player with windows into Kratos' masculinity through other relationships, relationships of which violence has no value. The necessity for something that is not violence is further highlighted by Atreus' performance of the rebellious son. The rebellious son is Atreus' attempt to perform how he thinks Kratos performs: doing whatever he wants. Originally brought on by the revelation that he is a god, Atreus' embraces his idea of godly violence, something that Kratos is all too familiar with. However, Kratos does not answer violence with violence even when Atreus' violence is the directly leads to suffering and death. While the rebellious son exposes flaws in Kratos' parenting strategies, it gives Kratos the chance to show the violence against one's child is never the answer. Performances such as the rebellious son must be handled delicately, or they can become more problematic. Violence is important to Kratos' masculine fatherhood, as it is his

primary means of expression, but *God of War* recognizes that violence is not always the answer, forcing the player to deal with the consequences that are brought forth when violence is given free reign.

Lastly, (3) How does *God of War* explore fatherhood through choice? Player choice is limited in *God of War*, but the notion of choosing extends beyond the player's ability. *God of War* plays with the player's ability to participate, and this proves to be rhetorically interesting. The rhetoric behind these varying degrees of participation and control is amplified by *God of War*'s immersive procedures. The most prevalent is the game's camera, which fluidly acts as the lens from which the player sees the world. *God of War*'s seamless camera work enhances its persuasive elements by blurring the lines of control, and in some ways, laying the foundation for the varying degrees of choice in the game. While some games choose to give the player more narrative options and thus control, *God of War* makes subtle changes to what can be considered the game's mechanics. Of course, the most binary example of player participation is the contrast from Kratos' first and last encounter with Baldur. Removing the player's participation in the last fight with Baldur means that the decision to kill Baldur rests solely on Kratos. This positions the player similarly to Atreus who, and like Atreus, the player develops their own thoughts and feelings regarding what Kratos' choices subject them to. This removal of choice from the player suggests that fatherhood sometimes requires difficult decisions and could represent the effect that hegemonic masculinity has had on men who are filling their roles as parents. Because men are often depicted as secondary parents (Schmitz, 2016; Wall & Arnold, 2007), a role that Kratos undoubtedly played before the player began participating, his ability to navigate fatherhood is greatly hindered. Depicting Kratos as an emotionally absent father who is trying to improve his relationship with his son shows the difficulty of engaging with fatherhood in this manner. By the

end of *God of War*, it seems that Kratos is *choosing* to be a father, something that no one else, not even the player, can force him to do.

### **Implications**

Video games are not only a reflection of the material world's cultures and values, but they can interrogate or reify those cultures and values. *God of War* engages with hegemonic masculine norms, such as violence, to interrogate hegemonic masculinity. Through the game's procedures, the player is repeatedly reminded of the negative consequences brought forth by hegemonic masculinity. Importantly, playing *God of War* rather than playing a similarly violent game that engages with that violence differently, such as the original *God of War* (2005), offers a different moral outlook for the player. On one hand, games can interrogate dominant cultural norms and values, but on the other hand, the procedures must be carefully crafted to achieve proper execution. Absent an anti-father, *God of War* is just a game about a hyper masculine man who slays anything in his way while taking his son to spread his mother's ashes. This suggests that offering nuanced performances of masculinity in video games allows the player to carry with them these nuances into the material world.

*God of War* is rhetorically potent because it engages in procedural rhetoric, allowing players to participate in *God of War*'s argumentation. Traditional rhetoric typically features a speaker-audience relationship (Foss, 2005), but rhetoric in video games and programs departs from the traditional speaker-audience model and mandates the consideration of audience participation. While *God of War* is not the first game to utilize rhetoric through procedures, and it certainly will not be the last, it demonstrates the increasing importance to study video games as they become more technologically advanced. Procedural rhetoric works to impact its audiences in ways that other rhetorics cannot. One must assume that the range of participation in video

games will continue to increase, warranting research regarding immersion, participation, and procedures.

Through the technology available to the developers of *God of War*, they were able to create an immersive atmosphere, thus enhancing the empathetic connection with the construction of the game and its performances of masculinity. *God of War* achieves this atmosphere through technological feats, such as the camera, and also through portraying dynamic performances of masculinity that players can identify in the material world. Through this empathetic connection, the intensity and effect of the game's procedural rhetoric are particularly powerful. The nature of most video games results in the prolonged exposure to characters, norms, and ideals. *God of War* subjects the player to prolonged exposure of hegemonic masculinity, but in doing so, exposes the flaws in masculine performances that favor hegemonic masculinity. Much like TV shows, which often offer their audience dozens of hours of viewership, video games' lengthy interactions allow for nuanced performances and closer examination of these performances. This is another layer for video games to inform masculinity and, to a broader extent, the culture or cultures in which they are constructed.

Video games' effects undoubtedly manifest in the material world, but perhaps not to the extent which warrants blaming video games for mass shootings or other violent behaviors. Video games are very much a reflection of the cultures in which they were programmed. Culture in *God of War* mirrors cultures of hegemonic masculinity in the United States. The hyper masculine and emotionless father, extended exposure to violence, the rebellious son, and other features of the game are all staples of hegemonic masculinity. Video games can reify dominant cultural norms, but they are not responsible for them. *God of War* prompts the player to interrogate these staples of hegemonic masculinity as they appear in the game, but player agency

and material agency likely materialize differently. Unfortunately, completing the story of *God of War* does not necessarily mean that players will venture into the material world and view gender performance or fatherhood differently. Sometimes, messages are lost on their audiences, but that does not diminish *God of War's* rhetoric. Similarly to agency regarding the tools of *God of War*, procedural rhetoric can lead to macro-level shifts in player orientation, but that shift must start with micro-level interventions. Like the performances of masculinity, *God of War* asks the player to engage in nuanced discussions about hegemonic masculinity as they present themselves in the material world.

### **Foundations for the Future**

Many other interactions, scenes, and characters in *God of War* fell outside the scope of my analysis, suggesting that there is yet room to continue studying the game's rhetorics. My argumentation suggests that the game's procedures and performances of masculinity do not occur in a vacuum, and thus more broad analysis could prove significant to the game's argumentation. Most notably, *God of War* only features three female characters, Freya, Faye, and Athena, with Athena possibly being a ghost or a vision.. Faye plays a significant role in *God of War* but never speaks or acts in front of the player. This leaves Freya, Baldur's mother, as the only consistent woman portrayed in the game. All three of these feminine figures are represented differently and to different extents in *God of War*. While this thesis has focused on masculinity in *God of War*, equally interesting are its portrayals of femininity and its relative absence of female characters.

Lastly, *God of War* is rich with experiences of grief. Losing a loved one is never easy, and *God of War* seems to acknowledge this. Notably, Kratos and Atreus clearly have different grieving processes. Kratos' regulation of emotions creates a blockade of emotions that other

characters in *God of War* are not exposed to. Atreus, on the other hand, is more open with his feelings of his mother's passing. Baldur, to an extent, grieves his loss of feeling and possibly the relationship he shared with his mother. Similarly, Freya grieves the relationship with her son and mourns his death during the game's conclusion. *God of War* is a game about masculinity and fatherhood, and I suspect different performances of gender will interact differently with grieving processes. Hegemonic masculinity undoubtedly contributes to these grieving processes. Analyzing the rhetoric of grief in *God of War* could offer more insight into its gender performances, especially considering Kratos', Atreus, and Baldur's relationships with emotion.

*God of War* is but one game in a long history of games, each of which has equal potential for interesting analyses. Future games in the series, and future games in this genre, will benefit from the findings of this thesis. Video games certainly reflect the cultures in which they are produced, but they can also be used as tools to interrogate their cultures' hegemonic norms. Not every game interrogates hegemonic cultural norms, but this thesis helps illuminate the power of procedural rhetoric and the ability for video games to be actors in their respective cultures. Whether or not these games reify cultural norms depends on how they represent these cultural norms and how the games' procedures breathe life into the games' arguments. There is yet a large library of powerful games to study and a wide world of possible lenses to shed light on the important genre of video game rhetorics. I encourage all who are interested to at least inquire about the games they play.

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