

## Touching the Ancient World through *God of War*'s Kratos

Since 2005, the *God of War* franchise has sold in excess of 18.5 million copies of its various installments, spanning several console generations and inspiring numerous spin-offs. The series therefore constitutes a significant point of access to the ancient world, and arguably a first point of contact for many players of these games. But while *God of War* is perennially cited in catalogues of classically-inspired games, it has still to receive sustained critical attention from scholars of classical reception. It receives only passing mention in Lowe (2009) and Tomasso (2015), and appears as a supporting example in Hong (2015) and Gordon (2017), but has yet to enjoy the focus of deeper analysis aimed at its specific intervention in the classical canon and its representation.

This paper aims to begin the process of redressing this oversight, using critical frameworks from the field of Games Studies to unpack the interactive experience of classical Greece offered to players. Beginning with tools developed by Arnott (2016) to analyze the epic in video games, it articulates *God of War* as a postmodern discourse of the ancient world situated within other competing discourses, such as that of the hack-and-slash genre of games in which it participates. *God of War* offers a pastiche of classical mythology—inspired as much by *Clash of the Titans* (1981) as it is by ancient texts—but does so in response to the generic expectations of action games developed in Japan. As the paper argues, any critique of *God of War*'s narrative or audiovisual elements must acknowledge their relations to the game's designed mechanics, and such elements should be treated as critical affordances offered to the player, rather than as mere window-dressing for those mechanics.

These broader ideas are advanced through a specific focus on *God of War*'s protagonist: the fearsome warrior Kratos. As the player's avatar, Kratos is the focal point of their interaction

with the games' representation of ancient Greece. Games Studies has shown that the player's relationship with their avatar is one of the sites where games offer a different experience from other media (Gee 2009; Keogh 2011). It is through Kratos that the player touches the ancient world, and thus it is Kratos who offers the primary constraints and affordances that structure that contact. Moreover, in narrative games like *God of War* the avatar is innately connected to what Aarseth (1997) calls the "ergodic" elements of the story: the conditions for narrative satisfaction that structure success within the game. To beat *God of War* is to bring Kratos' story to its requisite conclusion, and thus the player must expend physical and mental effort to advance goals rooted in Kratos' identity as much as their own.

As perhaps the most fundamental designed element of *God of War*, Kratos is thus a rich site to examine its discourses on the ancient world, especially because he is a wholly modern invention. While clearly inspired by figures from canonical myth, Kratos represents both an amplification and a distortion of many of their characteristics: a hyper-masculine, individualistic warrior who lacks any of the socially-oriented qualities that could have been drawn from them. Kratos affords limited actions to the player: primarily to strike and kill, and his story requires the murder of the Olympian gods and the bringing of destruction upon the mortal world. Yet even as the games invite immersion in Kratos' solipsistic quests, the dramatic elements often encourage alienation from him and the devastation he has wrought; the ancient world thus becomes something both to destroy and to mourn. Finally, the paper addresses how Kratos updates classical myth with contemporary concerns of race and gender dynamics, most notably in his design as a whiter-than-white male voiced by an African-American actor.

## Bibliography

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