

Kratos, Mythical Father

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Abstract

The acclaimed video game saga *God of War* surprises us with a new 2018 installment that shows the evolution of its protagonist, Kratos. In the last three games, Kratos had been a thoughtless hero fully committed to revenge but now the character created by the video game developer, Santa Monica Studio, presents a complex arc of transformation characterized by the protagonist's fatherhood.

The public of the world of video games has changed, has become more mature and demands more complex and narrative contents. We have witnessed this change in the cinema before. The moviegoers went through a maturation process very similar to the one facing video games now. An excellent example of this evolution is the *Star Wars* 1977 saga where George Lucas decided to place its most important moment right at its center: the mythical sentence, "Luke, I am your father."

By doing so, the whole saga's perspective was completely changed. The story that *Star Wars* displays is not just a flourish of incredible effects and spectacular explosions. What it really presents, adorned by all these elements, is a story of forgiveness between a father and a son. The video games mature fast. And in *God of War* we may observe an approach very similar to the one we saw in *Star Wars*.

Kratos has fled from Greece to end up in northern lands. There he raises a family, trying to leave his bloody past behind, and finally embracing a time of peace. But the burden he carries is very heavy, and only the death of his wife will really make him face the relationship with his son. Throughout this last installment we will see how the great hero of one of the most famous sagas of the world of video games embraces fatherhood, how he matures and becomes more human.

Keywords: Video games; *God of War*; storytelling; mythology; cinema.

We all get older: the players, Kratos, fictional character of the saga *God of War*, the narrative of video games. Back in the 1990s, the only concern of the person who sat before a video game was to have fun. It might have happened that from time to time he or she learned something or even got excited about a complex story. But we all get older, even the little sister of the arts.

We are a lucky generation. We have witnessed the birth of an art. This has happened only about seven times in the history of mankind. Video games, a little sister of the cinema and daughter of painting, had tough beginnings. Not everyone has accepted yet nowadays that video games may be a new means of artistic expression, arguing that there are many poorly made video games. In response, we could bring out countless

examples of terrible movies and many other awful theatre plays that, apparently, have not shaken the status of cinema or theatre as art. However, I think we can proceed in a more positive way.

The public of video games has witnessed the evolution of this medium and has seen how the content of the games that occupied the shelves of the stores was increasingly gaining in quality and narrative complexity. In the past a video game could sell a huge amount of copies thanks only to its spectacular technical capacity. As with the rest of the visual arts (painting, photography, cinema, etc.), emulating reality is enough at the beginning. In the first stages of the history of these arts, the quality of a visual work rested in its ability to reflect reality more or less accurately. But we all get older and there comes a time when this is not enough, and more complex expressive means are then needed.

Video games matured throughout the second half of the 1990s and the early 2000s. As years went by, the original graphic and sound flourishes were not enough. Complex contents became less unusual and, at the same time, more often requested by a growing public that needed “not more but better.”

God of War was first released on March 22, 2005. The approach was clear: lots of action. The intention of the producer in charge of the project, Santa Monica Studio, was to stir up the players’ adrenaline having them face the creatures of Greek mythology. It could have been any mythology. The key was the huge doses of action. What the public really cared for at that time was just that: an action game that had action. It was the single essential requirement for it to succeed. However, little by little, things changed (as in Studstill’s 2005 rendition of *God of War*).

In a genre as given to simple solutions as action, things began to change on March 16, 2010 with the release of *God of War 3*. This title was the latest of a tremendously successful saga aiming at reaching the same or even higher level of success than its predecessors. It had it all. All that was required then in order for an action game to succeed: spectacular fighting, violence, greater player’s skills to progress to next stages in the game. It had it all. But we all get older. The sales of the third installment of this saga did not please Sony, the company that produced the game. It seemed inexplicable but it happened. The initial explanation of this fact was that the saga was already obsolete. Nobody was interested in the adventures of Kratos, its protagonist. It was surprising since the design of the game mechanics was the most accomplished of the entire saga. But why did Kratos not awaken the interest of players any longer? In order to explain this, we need to get to know more about the most famous Spartan in the world of video games (such as developed by Asmussen in 2010).

Kratos was a Spartan soldier. His life was focused on being an exemplary warrior and he became a powerful fighter. When right in the middle of one battle he was about to die at the hands of an enemy, the god Ares offered him a pact: he would prevent his death and give him great powers in exchange for carrying out tasks for him for the rest of his life. Kratos accepted.

He faithfully executed the bloody missions demanded by Ares for years. However, the cruel god forced Kratos to kill his family and such an act dyed his skin white, like the ashes of his wife and son, and red for their blood. The Spartan broke the pact he had with Ares. He regained control of himself and swore to kill him, doing away with the entire Olympic pantheon in addition to numerous mythical creatures. This was more than enough in 2005.

But revenge did not end Kratos' pain and he continued his series of murders in three installments of the saga. In *God of War 3* he finishes Zeus off and the Spartan dies. Or so we thought, for we all get older, even the powerful Kratos. Sony knew perfectly well that they could not continue the saga with the same old format. Plenty of action and spectacular combat scenes were no longer enough. The public demanded something more complex, for we all get older (Martínez 2018).

The older sister of video games, cinema, had to face this same situation long time ago. In order to understand the evolution of the little sister of the arts we must analyze what happened to the cinema.

A narrative arc cannot reach and move the public if it is not filled with truth. The public will not build empathic bridges with the characters if what happens to them is a lie. It is not about fiction. Nothing to do with portraying facts that have occurred in reality. It is about ideas shared by all mankind, that have echoed in the souls of all people regardless of their origin, time, sex or circumstance. The only way to reach these universal ideas is through empathy.

The world of fiction is more than filled up with epic stories. In the 1960s there was a huge number of films about adventures in outer space. The space race between the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. made this theme fashionable. George Lucas wrote a script about space for his movie *Star Wars* and managed to find a relatively limited budget to film it. This 1977 work could have become diluted in the huge mess of fictional contents about space if *Star Wars* had been just another space adventure. But it was not like that. *Star Wars* told a story that could reverberate in anyone's soul, since it spoke of an idea shared by all mankind.

"I am your father." This sentence appeared at the middle point of the saga. The middle point is the key moment in a story, the moment when the story reaches its peak, when everything makes sense and its authentic message is understood. The middle point of *Star Wars* is not a terrible fight or an epic battle between two powerful star fleets that does not reverberate in anyone's heart. This is spectacular and may be beautiful but will not make its way into anyone's soul. However, the broken relationship between a father and a son and the path that Luke Skywalker begins to follow to redeem his father, to bring light to his tortured soul, to recover his love, that certainly has the power to thrill anyone, regardless of their place or time of birth.

Star Wars was a box-office hit thanks to its script. Not for its effects (more sophisticated in many other contemporary films) or for its spectacular scenes, but for the powerful echo of the message it conveyed. The scriptwriter, George Lucas, did not wish to move the viewer with an empty show. He had tried that before and failed. Lucas faced the writing of the script of the movie with a very clear attitude: how can I reach everyone's heart? The only way to go for him then was to embrace a subject matter treated by the Humanities from innumerable points of view and at all times: forgiveness that leads to redemption.

Ethical issues raised throughout the history of mankind offer us numerous answers to this question: should a son forgive his father even though the atrocities he has committed are completely abominable? Will Luke find peace if he embraces resentment and condemns his father? Can Darth Vader redeem himself through love for his son? These questions were contemplated by Lucas during the process of writing *Star Wars*. It falls beyond the scope of this paper to present his opinions about them, but the history of cinema teaches us that it worked: Lucas was right to take a chance on an idea that empathized with all humankind in his attempt to create something immortal.

Even so, we could argue that success with the audience is not enough to account only for film evolution. However, we need to move beyond this fairly superficial approach.

Chesterton said: "Fairy tales are more than true, not because they tell us dragons exist, but because they tell us we can beat the dragons." When we talk about reaching the heart of the audience, we do not mean just selling tickets. This is the logical consequence of the impact and thrill caused by art. We are discussing here the ability of the Humanities to raise questions that echo in the mind of the viewers. It is this kind of questions that make them consider life from different perspectives and give them tools to stand up again after having been knocked down. And to escape the desert of helplessness. People, inspired by art, face life courageously and also find in it a haven to return to when they have been injured. I cannot imagine a better use for it.

Star Wars talked about forgiveness. Not only were there ships firing lightning and light beams. This saga became immortal thanks to its middle point: "I am your father." A father, tortured by violence, by death, by war, who seeks redemption through his son. Little sisters always want to be like their older sisters at some point. They look at them admiringly and wishing they were older too. Video games accomplished the same goals in the 2018 *God of War 4* as cinema did in *Star Wars*.

The character of Kratos had to be developed. His incredible ability to kill was no longer enough. The gamers would not be as thrilled as before with just a great deal of action. It was not necessary, and it was not enough, just enough. The public had grown older and demanded more complex content. What used to work then seemed empty now. To guarantee the success of Kratos, the character needed to take the same leap that Lucas took in *Star Wars*: find a powerful middle point related to an idea that empathized with all mankind. It was a great challenge, but they made it. Let me explain how.

The beginning of the game makes it clear that Kratos has changed. Not only is he older but his eyes, his attitude, his actions, demonstrate that he carries a powerful emotional burden. The game introduces us into a very intimate funeral rite. Kratos faces the death of his new wife. But his son attends the ceremony this time. The Spartan relives the pain of that loss, but he does not turn his pain into a homicidal crusade now, since someone depends on him.

Kratos' son, Atreus, begins the adventure being completely dependent on his father. The first challenge of the game is not to kill a huge number of monsters but to test the boy, hunting with him. The relationship between father and son begins to develop from scratch. At the beginning we can clearly see that Kratos has not changed. He continues to act as the brutal killing machine we met in the third installment. Unable to express his pain in a healthy way, he contains his emotions and suffers again the death of his beloved in silence. But things have changed. We all get older and Kratos begins to exercise his fatherhood by taking a small step, hunting with his son.

The project manager, David Jaffe, clearly saw that the arc of transformation of Kratos would not be understood if it did not start at the beginning of the video game and if the gamer was not guided along the way by the hand of the protagonist. The gamer must witness the change in the life of the Spartan and participate in it, or else he would never accept that Kratos really was Kratos. The beginning of the game makes it clear that it is not just a continuation of the previous ones, but a disruptive break, a necessary evolution, essential to make Kratos a father. "Atreus, I am your father."

That little step, that sentence, "Boy, let's go hunting," is the first step in the new adventure. The script writers did not decide to put on Spartan's lips a statement: "Boy,

I will teach you to be a true warrior." They did not. Because that would have meant a return to the empty shows that stopped working in the first decade of the 21st century. A return that no longer sells video games. The first step of the new adventure is to interact with Atreus, a relationship that we clearly perceive to be very distant.

From that moment on, we begin to move through the Norse mythology seen through the eyes of a foreigner who shows us an update of the myth that the producers chose to create for us. Kratos is a stranger. He does not understand the Nordic world. He sees it from the Spartan perspective and asks himself questions that take us back to the stories that make up his own mythology. Atreus listened to his mother and, obviously, he had a real mother-son relationship with her. Thanks to this, he tells us what the Norse world is like and what myths make up the reality of the game. It is not an easy adjustment. Kratos has killed the vast majority of the Greek gods, his fame has reached the Nordic pantheon and they will not allow him to live in peace. It is too dangerous.

It is very clear. Kratos could easily survive the wrath of the children of Odin if he fled just by himself, as he already did in Greece. But something holds him back. For the Spartan, the change begins when he faces his relationship with Atreus since, when his wife dies, the gods, with their senses, can enter the forest where the two men live and detect them. Atreus will not survive the journey that awaits them if he does not learn to fend for himself. The transformation arc of Atreus, from a poor helpless child to the worthy companion of his father, is also represented by the design of the game mechanics. As we move forward in the story, Atreus improves his skills and he can help his father with the fighting. The player can handle Atreus through the Spartan's orders to his son, becoming key in the last fights in spite of the fact that he hardly does anything at the beginning.

The work of the Santa Monica Studio team is remarkable as they combine the transformation arc of Kratos with all the elements that make up the game. In an arc of narrative transformation, we move from an initial to a final position, which may be moderate or completely different, but the change must be very gradual and supported by all the elements that are available or else it will not produce empathy with the public, looking artificial and inconsistent. Kratos' transformation arc was quite a challenge. Its initial position was known to the public (brutal ruthless warrior) and the final position was completely different: Kratos embraced his fatherhood redeeming himself from a life full of violence and death, as it had happened to Darth Vader.

The first turning point in the story of the new *God of War* occurs on returning from hunting and it is key to the development of the rest of the game. It is only then that we discover that this is a new game, never seen before. Its creators use this fundamental moment in the script to take full advantage of the possibilities offered by the key competitive element for the players: the defense of Atreus. After Kratos returns home, he receives a visit and tells his son to hide. When he opens the door, a thin and tattooed man asks him questions about his past. The Spartan, curiously, avoids the confrontation and tells the stranger to leave. The stranger is not willing to leave and hits Kratos. The latter barely manages to move his face and tells the man to leave again. After a second blow Kratos responds with a very restrained punch that knocks the tattooed man down. When the stranger gets up, he strikes again and throws the Spartan through the air. At that moment one of the most spectacular scenes ever seen in the history of video games takes place. It leads Atreus' father to kill, or so we believe, the tattooed man who was destroying the surroundings of his house. This episode strongly strengthens the bond between Kratos and his son, making it clear that this is his priority, well above his

own security or the desire for revenge that ruled his past life. Now things have changed, we all get older, but Kratos' new ways remain faithful to his nature. He continues to be the same old Spartan. Only better.

Why does Kratos defend his son? Was their relationship not distant and rather unpaternal? Indeed, and precisely because of this, the Spartan's driving force toward change is so powerful and validates its arc, making it coherent. The duty of Atreus and Kratos is to leave the boy's mother's ashes on a distant mountain. It was her dying wish and the whole game consists of the long journey to the mountain from which they will throw her ashes into the wind. At no time does she request from Kratos to train their son, to protect him or coexist with him during the trip. She never does that, which means that the protection that Kratos exercises over his son is a projection of the love he felt for his wife. It is not duty that changes Kratos. Duty does not change anyone. It is not revenge that transforms the Spartan. Revenge does not improve anyone. It is love that changes Kratos. Love changes us all for the better.

The contact with Norse mythology is constant throughout the game. The Norse myths are the structure that accompanies the arc of Atreus' and Kratos' transformation, like the bass guitar that gives solidity to the song while the rest of the instruments shine above it. When the protagonists meet the characters Freya and Baldur, their mythological dimensions remain unknown, and only when we already know them intimately are their authentic mythical identities revealed to us. Throughout the adventure Atreus will find murals where myths are described in the way we have learned them, teaching his father the truth about the world around them. However, these myths have been modified by the studio that created this game, to adapt them to the peculiar narrative of the saga. We get to learn about the reality of these myths through Mimir, who has lived them firsthand, showing us the difference between the information that the inhabitants of the world have received, the original myth, and the reality that befalls the characters of *God of War*, more realistic and grim, but always respecting the myth (Gaiman 2017).

The arc of transformation that we witness in *God of War* is wonderful not because of the brutal fighting we experience throughout the game. Not even because of the marvelous long sequence shots that the producers manage to maintain throughout the game. It is not just that. Kratos' and Atreus' transformation arc is wonderful because we see how father and son, gradually for fifteen hours, learn to express their love, forged in the crucible of love for Faye, Kratos' wife and Atreus' mother. Throughout the game the two protagonists chat while they walk, climb, fight and live through terrible and wonderful experiences. These conversations are what makes us feel that their relationship flourishes: one character "softening" and the other maturing in a process of "sanchozation" of Quixote and "quixotization" of Sancho.

This narrative arc could not be completed without the tattooed stranger who attacks Kratos at the first turning point of the game. This stranger is none other than Baldur, son of Freya, who, according to Norse mythology, dies unjustly because of a trick performed by Loki. This fact does occur in the game, but it is shown through the prism of the narrative in *God of War* that has reinterpreted Greek's mythology in three installments. Gods are capricious in the game and they despise men. They know very well that Kratos is a terrible threat, so Thor sends his children, Modi and Magni, to kill the Spartan and bring his son to Valhalla. This was not part of the Greek's plans and he does away with both characters with the help of Freya. However, when the tattooed

man tries to kidnap Atreus for the third time, he does so in front of Freya and she reacts unexpectedly, protecting Baldur because he is her son.

By understanding this plot twist, we also understand two contrasting characters that help us circumscribe the relationship between Kratos and Atreus. A foil (contrasting) character is a narrative resource used to show dimensions of another character by contrast. In the movie "American History X" (1998) the protagonist, Derek Vinyard (Edward Norton), is a violent neo-Nazi who, after being convicted of murder, changes completely during his time in jail. He becomes determined then to prevent his younger brother, Danny (Edward Furlong), from ending up like him. Throughout the first half of the movie we witness the atrocities that Derek commits. To prevent the audience from believing that they are watching a pro-Nazi film, the director, Tony Kaye, introduces Stacey's character (Fairuza Balk), the sister, who does not stop condemning the acts of her brothers. By doing so, the director (Tony Kaye) makes the audience understand that he really condemns Nazism, casting aside halfway through the film any idea that the story is an abject propaganda of racist and totalitarian attitudes.

Baldur is Freya's son. In order to protect him, his much-loving mother gives him the gift of invulnerability. However, attached to this ability, there is the inability to feel anything. Baldur hates Freya for this, arguing that his life is empty, without sensations and feelings, and that he is doomed to live forever in an indestructible prison. The dysfunctional relationship between Freya and Baldur contrasts with the growing parent-child relationship between the Spartan and his son. Following the encounter with this reality, Atreus asks Kratos the most interesting questions and the Spartan sets a rule of conduct that guides his entire arc of transformation: a father will do anything for his son.

This is Kratos' safety buoy. The little haven of humanity he can cling onto, in the ocean of hate and revenge that his life had become. Kratos has always loved his family and, precisely because of that, he seeks revenge. But the same fire that fueled his revenge now fuels the love for his son and his unstoppable determination to protect him and fulfill the promise he made to his wife.

The last combat between Kratos, Atreus and Baldur is the culmination of the myth related to the death of the latter. A brooch that Kratos has improvised to prevent his son's quiver is made of mistletoe and, when Baldur attacks Atreus hitting him in the chest, his fist is caught in the brooch, which sticks to his hand. When this happens, Baldur recovers his mortality and the ability to feel and, after one of the most epic fightings in the history of video games, Baldur falls defeated, and Freya intervenes again to prevent Kratos from finishing him off. Father and son move away and then Baldur tries to kill his mother, as a revenge for so many years of indolent immortality. While he is strangling her, Kratos intervenes, doing away with him for good and saving Freya. She cries for her son reproaching Kratos for his help and provoking the question that seals the father-son relationship: why has Freya not defended herself? How far must a father's love go? His father's answer is clear: as far as it takes. As far as letting oneself be killed by Baldur, as far as killing Emperor Palpatine in order to save Luke; as far as it takes.

We all get older. Although the saga of *God of War* began as a bloodbath without too much content, it has become now the narrative of a father's relationship with his son. A story that upholds a clear message: there is nothing that love cannot overcome. The ability of this video game to disclose and display the Norse mythology has never been

seen before. The clash between Greek and Norse mythology is aptly recreated in this artistic production that manages to capture the video player's attention from the beginning and that validates the fact that Kratos, the most violent Spartan of the world of video games, is a very loving father.

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