

Chapter 7

God of War: What is it Good For?

Nietzsche’s “Master Morality” and the Single-Player Action/Adventure Genre

Peter Rauch
Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA

ABSTRACT

In God of War, the protagonist Kratos seeks revenge against the Ares of Greek mythology. As Kratos, the player is called upon to act in a manner reminiscent of Nietzsche’s “master morality,” reveling in power unrestricted by concern for any “objective” moral code or sympathy for his fellow man. The structure of the action/adventure genre in which God of War operates is particularly well-suited to this kind of morality. With one hero amid a world of disposable non-player characters, punctuated by the occasional appearance of a “boss” figure that behaves more like Kratos, a stark distinction is made between the powerful and the weak. This dichotomy is at the heart of Nietzsche’s master/slave distinction. Kratos and Ares seek to inspire fear; the hordes of disposable Athenians they both slaughter so carelessly seek only to avoid it. In allowing gamers to “play with” a moral worldview so starkly defined, God of War becomes a valuable tool for investigating and critiquing moral ideas in general.

INTRODUCTION

Of the gods we believe, and of men we know, that by a necessary law of their nature they rule wherever they can. And it is not as if we were the first to make this law, or to act upon it when made: we found it existing before us, and shall leave it to exist for ever after us; all we do is to

make use of it, knowing that you and everybody else, having the same power as we have, would do the same as we do (Thucydides)

While adventure games may take players to fantastic and disparate worlds, the morality therein remains quite familiar: a confused, often contradictory mish-mash of moral ideas, running the gamut from self-interest to personal virtue to the

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aggregate happiness of society. In *The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess*, for example, Link's own happiness, the happiness of Hyrule's inhabitants, and the means with which he pursues his goals are generally in accordance with every moral philosophy yet imagined, as there is near-universal agreement on the morality of actions like Link's in the situations presented by the game. Consequently, whether Link (or the game's writer) were an admirer of Kant's categorical imperative or Rand's ethical egoism, it would have no effect on the storyline or gameplay, despite the radical opposition of those two philosophies. *Fable*, on the other hand, allows a character to be nominally "good" or "evil," although the results are often inconsistent, silly, and largely irrelevant to play: a player may literally "pay off" their sins by donating to a temple, or save money by eating tofu.

Standing in contrast to this bland moral confusion is *God of War*, a single-player action/adventure game published in 2005, which aligns the player with a protagonist whose morality is as foreign to the modern mind as the mythological milieu that he inhabits. It is my argument that this nihilistic morality, closely resembling certain elements of Nietzsche's philosophy, is inherently consistent with the conventions of the single-player action/adventure genre. To that end, I will situate *God of War* in the conditions of its own medium and genre, compare and contrast it with games and conventions from related genres, and describe how the game allows and encourages players to enact the edicts of a Nietzschean morality. Set in the age of Greek mythology, *God of War* is an action/adventure game that depicts the life, death, and deification of Kratos, a Spartan warrior on a mission to assassinate Ares. In playing as Kratos, the player is called upon to act in a manner reminiscent of Nietzsche's "master morality," reveling in power unrestricted by concern for any *a priori* moral code or sympathy for his fellow man. Kratos' quest is motivated, from beginning to end, purely by vengeance, and any "good" done on behalf of the lesser inhabitants of his world, or

to abstract ideals of justice, is purely incidental. The revenge Kratos seeks is not reliant on any "higher" celestial or deontological authority: Kratos does not invoke a rule against which Ares can be said to have trespassed. Like Nietzsche's "nobles," Kratos is "value-determining," in that he determines that harming Kratos is bad (not to be confused with wrong) in general because it is bad for Kratos. *God of War* chronicles Kratos' attempts to challenge the gods to normativize his own values.

The structure of the genre (action/adventure) and mode (single-player) in which *God of War* operates are particularly well-suited to this kind of morality. One "hero" is pitted against a world of disposable non-player characters (NPCs), punctuated by an occasional appearance by a "boss" figure, who behaves more like Kratos, establishing a stark dichotomy between the powerful and the weak. This is the dichotomy at the heart of Nietzsche's master/slave distinction, which I will discuss in detail in terms of *God of War*. Kratos and Ares seek to inspire fear; the hordes of disposable Athenians they both carelessly slaughter seek, fruitlessly, to avoid it. In allowing us to "play with" a Nietzschean moral worldview so starkly defined, *God of War* becomes a valuable tool for investigating and critiquing that worldview. To explore such applications of this text, I will first elucidate the expressive structure of the videogame medium, then review Nietzsche's master morality and through it investigate the action/adventure genre in general and *God of War* in particular.

BACKGROUND

Frasca (2000, p.223) defines simulation as a "model [of] a (source) system through a different system maintains (for somebody) some of the behaviors of the original system." By this definition, nearly any videogame can be accurately described as a simulation. Contrasting simulation with representation (an expressive technique as-

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