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From Rage to Emotional Mastery: Exploring Stoicism Through God of War and the Power of Video Games as a Philosophical Medium

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Abstract:

The God of War video game franchise contains an evolution of Kratos from a vengeful warrior to a Stoic figure. Initially driven by rage and revenge, he opposes the Stoic ideals of temperance and acceptance. The 2018 and 2022 instalments under Cory Barlog's creative direction showcase a transition toward restraint and emotional mastery. This paper analyzes this evolution in parallel with Stoic philosophy. His journey embodies the way Stoicism is exercised in a modern story and how video games can be used to reflect on philosophical principles. Ultimately, his transformation reflects a Stoic pursuit of *eudaimonia*: it reinforces thematic depth beyond pure entertainment.

Keywords: Stoicism, Video Games, Mythology, God of War, Emotional Depth.

Video games are interactive digital narratives that put players into immersive experiences through gameplay mechanics ranging from simple puzzle solving to entire open-world adventures. In recent years, video games in addition to their primary aim of

entertainment have also become a medium for exploration of themes such as morality, personal growth, and other deeper philosophical concerns. This has enabled them to establish their place in contemporary culture and literature. The video games taken for this paper are *God of War* (2005), *God of War II* (2007), *God of War III* (2010), *God of War* (2018), *God of War Ragnarök* (2022), and *God of War Ragnarök: Valhalla* (2023). Through applying the tenets of Stoicism to these games, this paper explores the evolution of Kratos' character. To better understand Kratos' character development and his eventual formation into a practical Stoic, the paper will divide his growth into three main phases. His rage-induced revenge arc in the original trilogy will be the first stage, the impassive and emotionally unavailable Kratos in *God of War* (2018) will be the second, and finally, his eventual maturing into a true and practical Stoic in *God of War Ragnarök* (2022) and *God of War Ragnarök: Valhalla* (2023) will be the final stage.

Stoicism was founded by Zeno of Citium, who wanted to “become of the same complexion as the dead”, which he interpreted as studying the ancient doctrines. He became a pupil of Crates of Thebes and later taught at the *Stoa Poikile* in Athens, from which the term ‘Stoicism’ arose. This doctrine was further developed by Chrysippus who gave it a systematic structure. Later on came the ‘Roman Stoics’, namely Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus, and Seneca.

Moving on to the core components of Stoicism, it is divided into Physics, Logic, and Ethics, which are interconnected. Physics encompasses not only the study of natural, scientific or quantifiable phenomena but also of the nature of the world or the universe itself, including disciplines like epistemology, psychology, and metaphysics. The Stoics have a deterministic view of the world that goes through cycles of chaos and order, considering everything to be part of a greater plan by God (Zeus) or logos, which is the principle or power that persists throughout all of existence. This lays the groundwork for accepting the world and the situations one goes through as natural processes and thus resigning oneself to

one's own in a manner of acceptance, not defeat. Logic is what allows a Stoic to understand the Physics and act in accordance with Ethics. It is the reason that allows us to distinguish between virtue, vice, or the in-between which the Stoics called 'indifferents' and it allows us to understand how God shapes the world or understand the logos which then allows us to act in the right (virtuous) manner. Ethics is the practically applicable component. Stoic Ethics focuses on virtue, and living life virtuously which meant living life in accordance with nature. Logic helps us understand what is virtuous, and Physics helps us understand Nature in order to act in accordance with it. To understand nature is to understand one's own human nature as well.

The original God of War trilogy centres on Kratos, a Spartan warrior entangled in the world of the Greek gods. In the first game he seeks revenge against Ares, who tricked him into killing his own family, and kills him taking Ares' position as God of War. In the second game, he is betrayed by Zeus, and we see a revenge quest against the Olympians. The final game showcases the culmination of this quest and the destruction of the Greek pantheon.

In the trilogy, Kratos' actions are entirely antagonistic to what Stoicism professes. His initial failure to protect Deimos, his brother, affects his psyche to such an extent that he is willing to tattoo himself. He resents his fate and rebels against it. The context of the 'prophecy' of a "Marked Warrior" also implies the existence of a predetermined fate, which the stoics believed to be the "will of Zeus" (Durand et al., sec. 2.8). Aulus Gellius describes this fate as "a certain natural everlasting ordering of the whole." (Aulus Gellius, qtd. in Durand et al., sec. 2.8) where past events influence the present. Lysandra, Kratos' wife, has often requested him to reform his ways and abandon the path of violence, when he has been the captain of the Spartan army. He pays no heed to her request and eventually it leads to his defeat by Alrik. Then again we see Kratos' refusal to accept his fate when he calls on Ares for help against Alrik, "Ares, destroy my enemies and my life is yours." (*God of War*, 2005)

wishing for victory over Alrik in exchange for servitude to the god. Here, Ares gives him the Blades of Chaos, the chains of which sear themselves into his very flesh. This is a metaphor for his rage, unkempt emotions, and struggle with fate, which chains him down. A Stoic would not have been entirely unaffected by this event. However, he would have been able to regulate himself to such an extent with his knowledge of the framework of Physics and apply Logic to think and act rationally as well as accept fate for what it is. Chrysippus' analogy of the cone and cylinder drives home the fact that even though fate affects us, we retain control over our reactions to it (Durand et al., sec. 2.8). Both shapes require an external force to roll, but the way they roll depends on their characteristics which represents a person's unique reaction to a situation (Durand, et al., sec. 2.8). Rationality is what Kratos lacks at his core. He is at the mercy of his emotions, namely his rage and hubris, leading to irrational decisions such as tattooing himself, serving Ares, and vowing revenge against the gods. The consequences of his refusal to accept his fate are evident from this very instance and are made more distinct in later events throughout the plot.

Kratos is bound by his emotions just like he is bound by service to the gods. He has gained so much, yet his past still haunts him through nightmares of his family's death at his hands. This is similar to the Stoic belief about the material, they believed it is fine to have material prosperity but it is not what matters to achieve *eudaimonia* or happiness. Wealth and fame came under the category of 'indifferents' which are things that "are neither good nor bad and, thus, "indifferent" (*adiaphora* / *indifferentia*) to human happiness" (Durand et al., sec. 4.3). Kratos is unable to come to terms with or accept his tragic past and as a result turns to suicide as a means of escape after enacting his revenge, "... now there is no hope." (*God of War*, 2005) his inability to accept the things that happen to him goes against the core principle of acceptance in Stoic philosophy. According to Zeno of Citium, "Happiness is a good flow of life", which Kratos in his current state cannot achieve. He is in a constant state

of trying to reject his past but fails continuously. The ashes on his body, the chains of the Blades of Chaos, and the recurring nightmares symbolize his struggle with accepting his past. Thus, Kratos is at odds with the Stoic belief that “every event that occurs in the world is the result of a cause or chain of causes, so that everything that happens is metaphysically determined by preceding causes in the chain.” (Durand et al., sec. 2.8).

The killing spree Kratos goes on, and the bodies he leaves in his wake are however, mere foreshadowing of what is to come in the final installment of the trilogy. Again, Kratos is led on by his intense rage and bloodthirsty quest for revenge. What started with wanting to save his child from being sacrificed has now resulted in him plotting the destruction of Olympus. It is worthy to note that Kratos’ circumstances are indeed pitiful considering the betrayals and loss he has faced, albeit his inability to regulate himself has led to much needless death and destruction, “The Stoics famously argue that the virtuous agent feels no passions (*pathê*) and, so, that the happy life is entirely passion-free (*apathês*).” (Durand et al., sec. 4.7). Here Kratos is quite the contrary, controlled by his “passions”; he is unable to behave in accordance with stoic virtue. Kratos proclaims, “If all of Olympus will deny me my vengeance, then all of Olympus will die!” (*God of War II*). He also says, “I am what the gods have made me!” (*God of War II*), showing that he is unwilling to accept his circumstances and instead blames external forces for his actions. He is at the mercy of his circumstances. In a practical sense, this is symbolic of how the inability to regulate oneself can destroy one’s very life, interrupting the smooth flow required for happiness (*eudaimonia*). Stoicism seeks to resolve this with the philosophy of temperance, acceptance, and self-regulation, that Kratos lacks. Kratos’ refusal to accept his fate is again quite literally symbolized in him eliminating the Sisters of Fate who hold power over, as the name suggests, fate itself and using their powers to turn back time and change his fate. Kratos says, “The hands of death could not defeat me, the Sisters of Fate could not hold me...” (*God of War III*).

With the culmination of his quest for revenge and the resulting destruction of an entire Pantheon, Kratos is left with nothing else left to strive for. The quest of a man who simply wanted solace from the nightmares that plagued him, who just wanted peace resulted in all of this due to his lack of self-control, moderation, and acceptance. A noteworthy event is Pandora's willingness to accept her fate as the key to the box and her resultant sacrifice. She achieves fulfillment, but Kratos who defied fate with sheer will stands alone and distraught. The literal 'chaos' that inflicts the world due to Kratos' actions is reminiscent of the chaotic 'flow of life' that a man whose emotions are unregulated is bound to experience. In the original trilogy, we see Kratos defying every principle of Stoicism to the extreme and the resultant extreme conditions he is put through. In the following games, we will be looking at a complete character shift as mentioned before, primarily due to the directorship of Cory Barlog who intends to focus on the emotional growth and maturity of Kratos.

God of War (2018) is set in Norse mythology; Kratos' attempts to escape his past have led him here. He marries a woman named Faye and has a son, Atreus. The game opens with the funeral of Faye. Her final wish was to have her ashes scattered at the highest peak in all the Nine Realms. Along the way, the duo of Kratos and Atreus face foes and obstacles, both physical and psychological. They struggle with their relationship and identities eventually forming a stronger bond between the two based on mutual understanding.

Kratos takes no time to grieve and immediately sets out on a hunt after the funeral. This is a denial of his own emotions, not accepting that his or even his son's emotions are valid. He offers no words of consolation, instead acting harshly toward his son. Through their interaction, it is evident that they do not have much of a father son relationship as Kratos has hidden his past from this family and is quite 'absent' physically and emotionally. This absence is against the principles of the 'Good Fathering' theory by Mark T. Morman and Kory Floyd. A son needs the presence of his father, and a good father should be present with

his children most of the time, but this is not the case with Kratos, who is predominantly absent from Atreus' early childhood (Jordan, 142).

In the beginning, Kratos shows less concern about Atreus's well-being as his son and is more concerned with his well-being as a burgeoning warrior. Throughout the game, Atreus yearns for connection: with his father, with Freya, with other characters. The early lessons that Kratos teaches Atreus about remaining vigilant toward others and closing his heart to the suffering of his enemies are identified as being useful for a warrior, but that they do little to soothe the pain of a young boy who just lost his mother. (Sanders, 49)

There is an emotional disconnect due to a refusal to accept and acknowledge the past. Faye was the involved parent and with her death, Kratos struggles to interact with his son. During their hunt, Atreus prematurely takes a shot, which leads to the deer escaping. In this instance, we see a glimpse of the old Kratos as he loses his cool and shouts at Atreus, saying, "What are you doing?" (*God of War*, 2018). Again, we see an example of bad fathering as Kratos not only fails to express his affection explicitly but also makes the mistake of letting his short temper get the better of him (Jordan, 142). Kratos tasks Atreus with tracking down the deer. It is also noteworthy that Kratos never refers to Atreus by his name or as 'son', instead opting to call him 'boy'. This emotional detachment is not what Stoicism professes. "Whereas passions are typically directed at indifferents incorrectly judged to be good or bad, the Sage's good feelings are emotional responses to genuine goods, i.e. to virtue, virtuous actions, and virtuous friends" (Durand et al., sec. 4.7). The normal person misjudges an 'indifferent' incorrectly as good or bad, and thus has an emotional reaction, while the sage is capable of 'feeling', and experiences rational emotions in line with stoic "Virtue". While the earlier Kratos was controlled by his emotions, the current Kratos refused to acknowledge his emotions altogether. The absence of the Blades of Chaos, which is now replaced by Faye's

weapon, the Leviathan Axe is also an important aspect as it symbolizes the shift in Kratos' character and his attempt to escape from his troubled past. Looking deeper into the choice of weapons, the blades had the element of fire while the axe focuses on frost, again symbolizing the rage that used to roam free and the current coldness, emotional unavailability respectively.

It is evident that Kratos has learned from his past when he advises Atreus to control his anger (when Atreus lashes out at the troll they killed) and use it as strength instead of letting it control him. However he has taken it too far with the emotional detachment. Kratos' emotional detachment prevents him from finding the right things to say to his son. In the early part of the game, Atreus kneels before the deer they finished off while Kratos stretches out his arm, seemingly to place it on Atreus' shoulder to console him, but Kratos hesitates and instead takes the knife out of the deer and gives it back to Atreus symbolizing a lack of parent-child interaction between the duo. Although there is an attempt to establish a relationship in this instance, it is ruined by Kratos' inability to act stemming from his refusal to accept his emotions and past as mentioned earlier. When the stranger who has been sent by Odin approaches their home and finds out about Atreus. Kratos taps into his godly powers to save his son. We see that Kratos is not impassionate and does care for his son both as a protective father and a caring one although he does fail at the latter. Instead of being frustrated or enraged at their situation of being pursued by the Norse gods, we finally see Kratos learn to accept his circumstances and deal with it accordingly. During their adventures we learn that Atreus suffers from a 'sickness' that puts him into a trance like state whenever he loses himself to rage which becomes prominent later in the story and this paper in the aspect of 'nature' and 'identity'.

The vision in the light at Alfheim and Atreus' dialogue about his father's absence, in the vision, truly expresses how much Kratos' emotional absence as a father figure has

impacted him. Atreus talks of how they do not have a father-son bond, how he wishes Kratos had died instead of Faye, and then expresses his wish for his father to be better and how he believes Kratos and he can build a bond. We see that Atreus does wish to establish a connection with his father and is willing to put in the effort but is halted by his father's lack of emotional interaction, which has led to the inability of Kratos to form a strong relationship and holds him back from becoming a good father. We do see further examples however, that Kratos is not truly cold-hearted, in the vision when he was about to reach Faye, we hear his voice crack with emotion as he calls out to her. He is also distraught when brought out of the vision itself. This indicates Kratos breaking out of his protective shell and showing a moment of vulnerability. The verbal argument the duo have after leaving the temple is also another example of this vulnerability. Kratos says, "Do not mistake my silence for lack of grief!" (*God of War*, 2018). Atreus learns that Kratos grieves in his own way, and Kratos himself learns how his actions have caused the rift between him and his son. The moment of vulnerability between the two marks the start of an attempt at building a father-son relationship, an attempt by Kratos to understand not just himself but also his son.

Both Kratos and Atreus struggle to come to terms with and understand their true 'nature', respectively. According to Stoicism, not knowing one's true human nature results in a disruption of the flow of life, leading to a disturbed and chaotic mind. "One cannot genuinely know (e.g.) what should be endured or feared without also knowing how knowledge itself is acquired (a topic in logic) and how nature operates in both human beings and the cosmos at large (a topic in physics)" (Durand et al., sec. 4.2). This is precisely the case with Atreus as he is unaware of his godhood which is what leads to his sickness as is revealed by Mimir. Freya says to Kratos, "Who you were before doesn't matter. This boy is not your past, he is your son and he needs his father." (*God of War*, 2018). This reminds him that in his battle with his past, he has unknowingly pushed his son away due to the former's

godhood. The consequences of not coming to terms with oneself are fully portrayed in this visual narrative through the duo's interaction with Modi and Magni. Atreus, overcome by rage, accesses his godly power but promptly faints due to the 'sickness'. Atreus' moment of rage is extremely similar to the Kratos of the original trilogy. Kratos sees his past self in Atreus and as a result albeit subconsciously tries to distance himself from what he perceives as his past which has contributed to their rift. "Much of Kratos's lessons seek to end the life of anguish experienced by the gods. Yet, his continued omission of his perpetuation of the cycle of vengeance during the Greek arc leads to Atreus's resistance to control and further slippage into that cycle." (Sanders, 53).

Kratos must accept who he truly is to make things right. The theme of omission and its consequences are reiterated. Kratos says to Atreus, "I killed many who were deserving ... and many who were not." (*God of War*, 2018), emphasizing that the ghosts of Kratos' past still haunt him; however, he is attempting to come to terms with it. The Blades of Chaos stand as a symbol of his past that never leaves him, despite his efforts to discard them. He eventually does come to terms with the fact that he cannot keep running and for the sake of his son, equips the cursed blades once more. "Kratos's reflection on his past actions serves as one of *God of War's* (2018) significant departures from the Greek arc." (Sanders, 41). This reflection and eventual acceptance set Kratos on the path to achieving true Stoicism and attributes psychological depth to the game. Kratos has visions of Athena, as he goes to retrieve the blades, who asserts that no matter how hard he tries he will forever be a 'monster'. Kratos, however, in stark contrast to his previous self, accepts this fate and proclaims, "I know. But I'm your monster no more." (*God of War*, 2018).

Kratos reveals their godhood to Atreus which strengthens their bond to the point where they even feel close enough to share a drink of wine. Atreus, however, lets it go to his head and enveloped in hubris, he goes on a power trip and performs unethical actions.

Although Atreus understands his ‘nature’ now, he does not use his *logos* or Logic to apply ethics into his actions and behave virtuously. Both the player and Kratos himself see the old Kratos forming within Atreus. After Atreus shows contempt to all mortals including his mother and kills an injured Modi, Kratos says, “there are consequences to killing a god” (*God of War*, 2018). Kratos’ dialogue hints at his past and Atreus’ transformation into the monster Kratos once was. It is also to be noted that Atreus does ask how he knows of these consequences. However Kratos refuses to answer, showing that although they have opened up to each other, Kratos still hesitates from showing his true self and revealing his complete past.

In the final part of the plot Baldur, the stranger who they encountered in the beginning of the game, and the duo fight and end up in Helheim where we see the three plagued by apparitions of their past. Atreus sees himself killing Modi, while Atreus and Kratos see Kratos brutally ending Zeus. The duo is forced to confront their past and Helheim functions as an introspective journey serving to understand their ‘nature’. In the case of Baldur we see how he is put under a spell by Freya to save him from an illness. The spell renders him impervious to all pain but also pleasures. This leads to his life being dull and thus he seeks thrills in whatever he could find, including battles. He is reminiscent of a man who seeks constant stimulation, in this case, violence, and is discontent with life. Kratos however has come full circle, recognizing the cycle of violence that persists with vengeance. Kratos says, “The cycle ends here. We must be better than this.” (*God of War*, 2018). He seeks to break the cycle of parricide as he kills Baldur to protect Freya from being killed by Baldur himself. Kratos sees himself in Baldur and this final act is a sort of mercy killing to prevent Baldur from going through what Kratos himself has endured. A reformation of Kratos is evident here, his turbulent past acting as a guide for others. This endeavour for betterment marks Kratos’ transition into a true Stoic. Once they reach the peak in Jotunheim, Kratos removes

the bandages on his arms that masked the scars where the Blades of Chaos were once seared as he no longer has anything to hide. The introspection through the vision at Helheim has laid bare his past for his son to see. He is finally accepting himself and is willing to show himself as he is to the world, as well as his son Atreus. Kratos goes from being cold and distant to developing emotional nuances through understanding himself and accepting his past. This journey is carried on and comes full circle in the final instalment of the God of War series.

God of War Ragnarök (2022) has Kratos and Atreus deal with their respective roles in the prophesized *Ragnarök*. Atreus wishes to fulfill his role as Loki, while Kratos wishes to take a pacifist route of inaction. Their paths diverge and re-converge numerous times, eventually ending with the death of Odin and the destruction of Asgard. This game's sequel, *God of War Ragnarök: Valhalla* (2023) picks up after Atreus sets off on his own path, Kratos and Mimir go through Valhalla while Kratos himself attempts to reconcile with his past and change for the better.

These two games mark the culmination of Kratos' journey in the Norse pantheon and his evolution into a 'practical stoic'. The relationship between a now teenage Atreus and a reformed Kratos is evidence of his transformation. Kratos refers to Atreus by name and even 'son' in these games. Initially Kratos out of fear of losing his son, denies Atreus autonomy however, he begins to understand his son's capabilities and trusts him to follow his own path. Atreus is also an influence on Kratos, enabling him to open his heart and be empathetic. This helps Kratos break out of the emotional shell he has constructed to shield himself from his past. Kratos in stark contrast to his previous self accepts the prophecy of his death shown on a mural, and chooses to trudge on as far as life would take him. His destructive impulses are also fading as seen in his refusal to participate in Ragnarok, him sparing Thor in their final fight, and in him refusing to destroy Odin's soul, which has been sealed in a marble, of his own volition.

God of War Ragnarök: Valhalla (2023) is the epilogue to the series. Kratos' journey through Valhalla is a metaphorical and physical one. He is thrust into memories of his actions in Greece. The reformed Kratos confronts these memories with rationality and acceptance, which is in line with true Stoicism. The game concludes with Kratos confronting his younger violent self in a vision. The monologue given by Kratos marks his transformation from a vengeful to a hopeful god. The monologue begins with him addressing his younger self as a separate entity, gradually transitioning into talking about himself, "... A God of war. God of pain, of suffering, of destruction. The Norns said I chase redemption that I know I can never deserve. What does that make me? God of fools. A God of... Hope. When all else is lost. You lost everything and everyone you became... There is no forgiving you. You chose... I chose. What now? Should I, the same man, should I sit? Take? Proclaim? Lead? Place myself in service? In service. Should I lose everything and everyone, there's to be enough left inside so that I do not become you? I do not know. But I have... hope..." (*God of War Ragnarök: Valhalla*). This shows that he has finally come to terms with his past and accepted everything that has happened to him. He also looks forward to what the future holds for him. This acceptance finally grants Kratos the *eudaimonia* he sought all these years.

Kratos' journey throughout the *God of War* series showcases substantial character growth from a vengeful and rage-fueled god to a true Stoic capable of acceptance, temperance, and rationality. This evolution is in line with Stoic philosophy and is the central thread of the series showcasing 'practical stoicism' or what Stoicism truly is meant to be. The expression of such subjects with psychological and philosophical depth warrants the capability of video games as a medium for exploring complex philosophical themes, reaching beyond the realm of mere entertainment.

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