

From Ghost of Sparta to Viking Dad: How the *God of War* Series Offers Players a Pathway Towards Healthier Masculinity

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INTRODUCTION

This presentation centers on the aspect of my doctoral work dealing with video games, specifically how Viking masculinity, as represented in the two most recent *God of War* (Santa Monica Studio 2018, 2022) games, might impact male-identifying players. I examine gender theorists writing about masculinity to frame a deep-dive analysis of Kratos and how his expression of masculinity has changed over the course of the franchise to become a healthier example of how to ‘be a man’.

Spanning six main installments and numerous smaller games, the *God of War* series has followed the story of Kratos as he evolves from a rage-fueled Spartan monster to a bearded, stoic father, grappling with his life choices and the impact they may have on his son Atreus. First appearing in 2005 on the PlayStation 2, Kratos has grown up along with Millennial players and has matured into adult- and parenthood as they have. In the early games, Kratos, an avatar of pure violence, would rip enemies apart, coldly pushed away his daughter, and upended the world in his revenge quest against the Greek Pantheon. He started out as a typical male game protagonist, reinforcing the mold of the hypermasculine for a presumed cis-het male audience. With the two most recent games, however, he has managed to challenge his earlier self, affording audiences the opportunity to reflect on their own expressions of masculinity, whether in or outside of games. As the series was and still is a “system seller” for PlayStation, this makes the transformation of the character in 2018 *God of War* even more noteworthy.

Western men’s affinity for Norse representations of masculinity springs from the power of the Viking as an archetypal character that engages with many of the standards of traditional masculinity: physical power, strong leadership, and the respect of other men. But for male audiences searching for examples of characters in media that fit better with conceptions of modern masculinity, fictionalised Vikings offer a healthy mix of ‘traditional’ masculinity while also offering a near-subversive example of how ‘manly’ men can co-exist with powerful women. Kratos fits this mould in his relationships with Freya.

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According to many gender scholars, [those studying masculinity such as Vic Seidler (2005) and Michael Kimmel (2008, 2017), and others focused on women's issues such as bell hooks (2004) and Judith Butler (2024)], male gender identity is built on a foundation men's fear that they do not measure up, that they are not 'real' men. Gender policing of male-identified people is one of the most pernicious aspects of patriarchy. Keeping men constantly on their guard about how they perform and express their masculinity leads to mental health problems, substance abuse, suicide, and isolation (Kimmel 216). Men are culturally conditioned to believe that most expressions of emotion are off limits if they wish to retain high status among a community, and particularly one that made up of other men. Numerous scholars have approached how this emotional bottling funnels into the one acceptable emotion—rage—and translates to violence. In his book *Humiliation*, William Ian Miller explains how societies based on the virtue of honour (such as Vikings) handle those who fail to live up to those standards, namely through humiliation, a strong disincentive for social transgressions that looms at the back of male-identified experience, a constant fear and threat.

Kratos has taken on a weight as he moves through the Norse world with his "boy" in tow. When his son learns of his own godhood, for a time he becomes like his younger father: impulsive, rash, and murderous. Kratos has to connect with his son to bring him back to the truer version of him, the young boy who cares for animals, helps the spirits of the dead pass on, seeks stories and reads the runes to his father. Kratos's accountability fully blossoms when he says "I am sorry" to his son. These three little words conveyed with sincerity from a father to a son mark a seismic shift in the character. Atreus says he thinks he runs "better on chaos" and the stoic Greek Spartan who lives by rigid discipline open up to each other, recognizing that they are better together.

On the surface, Viking media offers shirtless men drinking, fighting and taking women to bed. Marvel's "fat Thor," which was played for laughs, still shows the burden of male depression and the struggle of generations of men to deal with a breakdown in a sense of self, when they fail to live up to the ideal of heroic masculinity. But games like these can offer a meaningful alternative.

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BIO

Evan Woolbright is a doctoral student at Flinders University. His research examines the role media plays in challenging and reinforcing society's expectations of male masculinity, looking in particular for examples that challenge masculine norms and exemplify male vulnerability and emotional range. He has a Masters in English Composition and Communication.

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