

I Am Your Monster No Longer

Reflections on the Humanization of a Heroic Figure and the Role of Semantic Items in GOD OF WAR IV

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Abstract

The latest installment in the GOD OF WAR series seems to reinvent the figure of Kratos, the archaic, heroic Spartan who, driven by unbridled vengeance, excels at excessive violence. The monster is apparently replaced in the new GOD OF WAR by the figure of the self-controlled, reflective father who does not want to repeat the mistakes of his past for the sake of his son. In contrast, this paper explores the question of the extent to which the heroic figure can actually modify its role, or whether it is not rather designed from the outset to be more complex than the “humanization” of the hero established in GOD OF WAR IV suggests.

INTRODUCTION

The latest installment of the GOD OF WAR series from Santa Monica Studios—the eighth by now, taking into account all gaming platforms—significantly lacks a consecutive numbering system or title suffix.¹ Thus, the 2018 title GOD OF WAR (GoW IV), which was used for the second time for Playstation 4 after the first game on Playstation 2, already nominally points to an intended new beginning of

1 The God of War series presently encompasses seven titles, from: GOD OF WAR (USA 2005, Santa Monica Studios), to: GOD OF WAR (USA 2018, Santa Monica Studios). See “Gameography” for a full list.

the game series. This can be seen above all in the change of the mythological setting, the new (companion) character of the protagonist Kratos—his son Atreus—and in the new portrayal of Kratos, who was previously perceived as a “vengeful barbarian,” which was often praised by game journalists.²

The Kratos of the previous game titles is already a commander of the Spartans at a young age and a favorite of the Greek god of war Ares. He slashes his way equally ruthlessly through opposing armies and innocent townspeople under the protection of Athena, and eventually, through being deceived by the god of war, ends up killing his own family in a battle frenzy. Driven by revenge, Kratos first kills Ares, takes his place, and through further warfare comes into conflict with the gods of Olympus—first and foremost his father Zeus. In the end, he kills all the gods of Olympus in a second Titanomachy and brings about the downfall of Greece.

Different voices that mingle with the prevailing praise of a reinvention of the Spartan, draw attention to the fact that the portrayal of the Kratos figure is not reduced to the excessively violent depiction of a one-dimensional, blind-minded and purely egoistic conqueror of Olympus. The discussion that was sparked by the latest spin-off of the GOW series around the (anti-)hero Kratos is rather aligned in its disagreement with the extremes of its protagonist. In addition to more circum-spect observations that the revenge-filled Spartan in GOW IV³ now gains depth of character in his role as a father and is much more than an “angry lump of muscle.”⁴ there are clearly negative judgments about the character’s lack of coherence:

“The story’s biggest problem is that it attempts something that can’t really be done. It tries to rehabilitate that which cannot be rehabilitated. This Kratos is the same Kratos who was pure animal lust for a half-dozen games, driven solely to kill or sleep with every living creature he came across.”⁵

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- 2 Eadicicco, Lisa: “The New ‘God of War’ Game Is Different, Bold and Demands Your Attention,” in: *Time*, 18.04.2018, <http://time.com/5245517/god-of-war-review/>
 - 3 GOD OF WAR IV (USA 2018, Santa Monica Studios).
 - 4 MacDonald, Keza: “God of War’s Kratos was an angry lump of muscle. I made him a struggling father,” in: *The Guardian*, April 26, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/games/2018/apr/26/god-of-war-sony-kratos-father-son-cory-barlog>
 - 5 Martin, Garrett: “God of War Doesn’t Entirely Solve the Kratos Problem,” in: *Paste Magazine*, April 23, 2018, <https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2018/04/god-of-war-doesnt-entirely-solve-the-kratos-proble.html>

But there are also objections to such a reduction of the figure:

“Whether you connected to the GOD OF WAR games or not, there is no denying that Kratos has always had an emotional pull with the audience, even if they never realized it.”⁶

Many other appraisals of the new part of the GoW series move between these two extremes. It should also be noted that there is disagreement about which conceptual lines⁷ can and may be attributed to the character Kratos as constant character traits. There seems to be an agreement, however, that with the new mode of character representation in GoW IV, the perception of the character also changes. This is reason enough to once again raise the issue of portrayal of the character and how it might be evaluated.

KRATOS—A HEROIC FIGURE?

Figures that are not clearly characterizable as heroic, but show clear features of a hero when they perform exorbitant⁸ and morally questionable deeds⁹ inspired by revenge, are also a prominent object of research in medieval literary studies, which will be the starting point and analytical focus of this paper. Hero types such as those described below have been known since antiquity and are also included through pictorial portrayal in various media. This can also be found in GoW IV,

6 Kriska, Mark: “God of War: You Were Wrong About Kratos,” in: *Mammothgamers*, 04.05.2018, <http://mammothgamers.com/2018/05/god-of-war-wrong-about-kratos/>

7 Where not explicitly mentioned otherwise, with reference to Kratos this is understood as the principle of a narrative figure defined by Jürgen Sorg, whose conception refers to models from the literary tradition. Cf. Schröter, Felix: “Don’t show it, play it. Filmische und nicht-filmische Figurenkonzeption im Computerspiel.,” in: *Rabbit Eye – Zeitschrift für Filmforschung*, no. 5, 2013, pp. 22-39.

8 Cf. fundamentally von See, Klaus: “Was ist Heldendichtung?,” in: Klaus von See (ed.), *Europäische Heldendichtung. Wege der Forschung* 500, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1978, pp. 1-38, as well himself: von See, Klaus: “Held und Kollektiv,” in: *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie*, vol. 122, 1993, pp. 1-35, cited from Lienert, Elisabeth: “Aspekte der Figurenkonstitution in mittelhochdeutscher Heldene-pik,” in: *PBB* 138/1, 2016, pp. 51-75, here p. 68.

9 Cf. Lienert, Elisabeth: *Mittelhochdeutsche Heldenepik. Eine Einführung. Grundlagen der Germanistik* 5, Berlin, Erich Schmidt 2015, p. 9.

where the image of Kratos is depicted on an amphora.¹⁰ Written testimonies from middle age heroic epic are, in turn, included in the analysis. This approach is, of course, only one of many possible modes of portrayal and is not to be seen as a form of valuation against ancient written testimonies and hero types. With regard to the digital medium, the inclusion of literary as well as pictorial patterns lends itself, since it is above all a medium of showing and representing¹¹ and thus portrays a cross-media connection of text and image.

Middle High German heroic epic contains a plethora of multilayered heroic and anti-heroic figures—one might think here, for example, of Hagen and Kriemhild of the *Nibelungenlied*, or of the portrayal of Dietrich of the *aventurehafte Dietrichepik*, who is hesitating and simultaneously driven by retaliatory thoughts.¹² Different aspects of the characters do not have to be coherently arranged, but can, similar to what Fuchs-Jolie has pointed out for Wolfram's texts, be an essential stylistic element that juxtaposes "ambiguities of signifiers" and aims at making different things visible at the same time.¹³ Elisabeth Lienert summarizes the observations on medieval heroic figures in this one sentence: For (Middle High German) heroic epic, contradictions and gaps in attributions, especially to the figures, are known to be particularly characteristic.¹⁴ Figures with the

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- 10 Kratos finds an amphora in the course of the game upon which he himself is depicted as a Heros with bloody blades. Obviously, this depiction captures the Heros, who in *GOW IV* seems to take a back seat to a 'humanized' version of the hero. This reading of the amphora is supported by the fact that it is used for a kind of initiation rite by Atreus. He drinks a sip of wine from the amphora with his father Kratos, contrasting the image on the amphora—the birth of the Ghost of Sparta, who killed his family in the furor depicted—with a scene in which the genealogical relationship is staged as intact and strengthened. The motif of the pictorial representation of heroes on ancient carrier media thus seems to be used retrospectively in a meta-reflexive way on the series of games and thus also finds its way into this contribution.
- 11 Cf. On a fundamental level: Fahlenbrach, Kathrin: *Medien, Geschichte und Wahrnehmung. Eine Einführung in die Mediengeschichte*, Wiesbaden: Springer 2018, p. 121-178.
- 12 Cf. Ibid., pp. 30-56; pp. 117-141.
- 13 Fuchs-Jolie, Stephan: "Metonymie und Metapher bei Wolfram," in: Andersen, Elizabeth et al. (eds.), *Literarischer Stil. Mittelalterliche Dichtung zwischen Konvention und Innovation 22*, Anglo-German Colloquium Düsseldorf, Berlin: De Gruyter 2015, pp. 413-425.
- 14 Lienert, Elizabeth: "Aspekte der Figurenkonstitution in mittelhochdeutscher Heldene-pik," in: *PBB* 138/1, 2016, pp. 51-75, here p. 52.

furor of a Kratos are no strangers to Middle High German and even to Old French heroic poetry (*chansons-de-geste*). A prominent example from the *chansons* would be Rainouart from the *Bataille d'Aliscans*,¹⁵ who, out of an uncontrollable will to convert, slays almost his entire kin along with thousands of his former compatriots with a fir tree turned into a weapon. In the Middle High German adaptation of this text, in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Willehalm*, the motif of revenge for the death of a young relative of the protagonist Willehalm is given as justification for the beheading of a defenseless enemy pleading for help.¹⁶

Such exaggerated and questionable acts of violence do not remain an exclusive feature of medieval heroic figures, but at first glance also seem to be the central characteristics of the Kratos figure, who is responsible for the killing of his own family through treachery and fighting furor. The drive for excessive retribution seems to be a characteristic of heroic as well as 'modern' heroes; valid moral boundaries and social conventions, which recipients of Middle High German literature as well as players of digital games bring into the consumed medium as prior knowledge and a foil for comparison, are exceeded. At least one aspect from a literary-scientific-medievalist perspective, however, raises doubt that Kratos, on the basis of the narration unfolded in the entire game series, can be entirely put on par with the notion of a blind hero: the remarkable observation of a 'humanization' of the hero Kratos in GoW IV.¹⁷

Therefore, it will first be determined whether this is an achievement of the current part of the GoW series or whether such a tendency has been part of the character conception from the very beginning. It will be necessary to pursue the question of how it can be possible at all to speak of a 'humanization' and thus also of 'empathy' with a heroic hero figure like Kratos. For this purpose, the aspects of the figure's biography that contribute to the so-called inconsistencies in the portrayal of the figure will first be traced. Then, the fundamental question of whether it is a matter of a completely new conception in GoW IV, i.e., whether the 'humanization' of one and the same heroic figure only becomes clearly

15 Holtus, Günter: "La versione franco-italiana della 'Bataille d'Aliscans,' Codex Marcianus fr. VIII [=252]," in: Holtus, Günter (ed.): *Beihefte zur ZfrPh* 205, Tübingen 1985.

16 Cf. for details: Nieser, Florian: *Die Lesbarkeit von Helden. Uneindeutige Zeichen in der 'Bataille d'Aliscans' und dem 'Willehalm' Wolframs von Eschenbach*, Stuttgart: Metzler 2018, pp. 45-65.

17 Gamwell, Chase: "Humanizing Kratos," in: *Imperium News*, 08.06.2018, <https://imperium.news/humanizing-kratos/>

apparent with the digital medium or is already found in pictorial representations of ancient heroic figures and Middle High German Literature will be pursued.

KRATOS' CHARACTER BIOGRAPHY: BETRAYAL-LOSS-GUILT-REVENGE-HOPE

Even the Spartan's childhood, which is part of the narration in *GHOST OF SPARTA*,¹⁸ hints at genealogical structures behind the ostensibly revenge-driven character, which could be a not to be underestimated driving factor for Kratos' progressively more aggressive deeds. In this regard, it is striking that in the games set in Greece, the nexus of divine intervention, betrayal, genealogical loss, and guilt is closely linked to the character conception of the Spartan.¹⁹ Thus, according to a prophecy, Zeus, the father of the gods, fears his own downfall at the hands of one of his sons. The only thing he knows about the identity of this son is that he bears a certain mark on his body. As a result, he sends Ares and Athena to kidnap the brother of Kratos—Deimos—as he carries an extraordinary birthmark. The still young Spartan fails to rescue his brother and in memory of him and as a memorial of his own failure, he has the birthmark of Deimos tattooed on his body. Moreover, in the battle with Ares, he sustained a scar over his right eye. Thus, from a semiotic perspective, the readability of Kratos already testifies at an early point in the character's biography to the loss of his brother, to Kratos' self-attributed guilt for this, and to the destructive intervention of the gods in the *vita* of the still young Spartan.

18 GOD OF WAR: GHOST OF SPARTA (USA 2010, Santa Monica Studios).

19 This connection of betrayal, loss and guilt can be found in Middle High German literature in more complex heroine figures. Dietrich's (tragic) heroic *vita* from the "Fluchtepen" is based on the betrayal of his confidant Witege and the resulting loss of his brother Diether, but he is repeatedly denied revenge against Witege, which constitutes the tragic fate of poor Dietrich. (E. Lienert: *Mittelhochdeutsche Heldenepik. Eine Einführung. Grundlagen der Germanistik*, p. 104). Here, unfinished revenge becomes a flaw of the heroic figure, whereas excessive revenge, which, as in the case of Kratos, is fueled by a consciousness of guilt for the death of relatives and one's own family, has a maximally destructive potential in the example of the Kriemhild figure in the *Nibelungenlied*. In addition, a tendency to demonize the figure can be identified, which can even be found in Kriemhild's text when she is referred to as *valandine* (e.g., NL 2371,4).

Because of his ruthlessness and extraordinary successes as a Spartan commander, Kratos rises in the ranks and in the process meets Lysandra, who becomes his wife—their daughter Calliope is born shortly thereafter. She is visibly ill from birth, according to Spartan law, meaning that she should die. Faced with the threat of further family loss, he defies the applicable law and, as a minion of the war god Ares, fights for the cure for his daughter against chosen warriors of other gods in order to save her from death. However, the role as commander and proof in battle—similar to, for example, Iwein's urge as an Arthurian knight for tournament travel—remains a central element of the character. Therefore, Kratos often leaves his family behind to fight further battles for his own family until, eventually, he is defeated by a numerically far superior army. Their commander, Alrik, has a vendetta against Kratos. He also fought for the cure Calliope received to save his dying father. Since being defeated by the Spartan in battle, Alrik, also driven by genealogical loss, is bent on revenge, which can only be prevented by divine intervention: Kratos calls upon Ares for help and swears allegiance to him if he kills Alrik and his army. The god of war agrees and as a sign of his new *vassal status* Kratos receives the so-called Chaos Blades; these two swords are attached to his arms with glowing hot chains.²⁰ However, this desire to fight and prove himself in battle leads to the killing of his own family when Ares, in one of the countless battles and village plunderings of Kratos, his most important vassal mingles Lysandra and Calliope with the villagers. Kratos kills them in a warlike frenzy and realizes the betrayal of the god of war only after the death of his family. Instead of thus creating—as intended—the absolute warrior vassal, detached from family ties, Ares thus creates his most determined adversary.

Cursed to wear his family's ashes on his ski, Kratos becomes the icon of a broken hero whose distinguishing characteristic of war-madness is turned against him, leading to a genealogical loss for which he himself is responsible—engineered by divine treachery.

Kratos seeks revenge, renounces his oath of allegiance to Ares and sets out to kill him. The consequence of the breach of the oath, as described in *GOD OF WAR: ASCENSION*,²¹ is that his deeds haunt him as visions and nightmares. In the prequel

20 The rescue of a hero by divine intervention (cf. *deus ex machina*) is a frequently used element in Old French heroic epic poetry such as the *Bataille d'Aliscans* (*BdA*), when the fight against the Saracens is also about the struggle for the claim to *truthfulness* of the religions that are in conflict with each other. Thus, for example, Guillaume—a Christian fighter—is saved from death several times in the battle because it does not please God (*BdA* 1387.92, 1424.33).

21 *GOD OF WAR: ASCENSION* (USA 2013, Santa Monica Studios).

CHAINS OF OLYMPUS,²² Kratos is briefly given the opportunity to be reunited with his daughter Calliope in the form of a stay in an afterlife. But once again divine betrayal follows, in this case emanating from Persephone and the Titan Atlas. Kratos is again forced to separate from his daughter, since he can only save Calliope if he separates from her. Especially in this scene, in which the player himself has to actively tear father and daughter apart by repeatedly pressing the button, the repeatedly experienced loss highlights the protagonist's denied chance to overcome his own guilt.

The loss of his family reactualized as the protagonist's characteristic act through the successful swearing break at the end of Ascension, is once again center stage at the end of GOD OF WAR I.²³ Before Kratos succeeds in killing the God of War, he is confronted with the mirage of his family, threatened by several doubles who took on his form. The player's or character's task is to protect Lysandra and Calliope from being killed repeatedly by the Spartan's doppelgangers, which can be accomplished by, among other things, allowing Kratos to embrace his family to give them life energy that, in turn, is subtracted from his own. Eventually, however, Kratos must once again witness his family being killed by him and the Chaos Blades, bringing the protagonist's own share of genealogical loss home to him once again. Thus, confronted with the betrayal of the god of war as well as his own guilt, he kills the god of war—his guilt, however, remains unresolved.

In GOW II²⁴ and GOW III,²⁵ Kratos ultimately blames the gods for their betrayal and his resulting genealogical losses, and embarks on a progressively excessive and violent campaign of revenge against Olympus, ending with the fall of Greece and the death of his father Zeus. While the thematic complex of revenge and especially the killing of his family has been dealt with in various ways so far as a reactualization of the brittleness of the hero Kratos, it hardly plays a role in GOW II and until the end of GOW III. It is only near the conclusion of GOW III that Kratos is again confronted with the death of his family. However, this time he manages to accept the killing and the guilt it entails. He literally draws hope, which in GoW, according to legend, was left in Pandora's Box when the plagues inside it afflicted humanity. After Kratos opened the box in GOW I, he received the power of hope, but it remained behind "layers of guilt"²⁶ until that moment. As a result, he kills Zeus and (supposedly) himself in order to sell the power of his

22 GOD OF WAR: CHAINS OF OLYMPUS (USA 2008, Santa Monica Studios).

23 GOD OF WAR (USA 2005, Santa Monica Studios).

24 GOD OF WAR II (USA 2007, Santa Monica Studios).

25 GOD OF WAR III (USA 2010, Santa Monica Studios).

26 <https://godofwar.fandom.com/wiki/Hope> , from 04.06.2022.

newfound hope as a gift to mankind, instead of claiming the—now sole remaining—power for himself as the last god or ceding it to the spirit of Athena. Kratos thus dies at the end of GOW III, less a “classical” death for his own memoria and apotheosis, but the death of a “modern hero” who “selflessly sacrifices himself for a good deed.”²⁷

Looking at the current offshoot of the GOW series and the new role of Kratos as the father figure²⁸ of Atreus depicted therein, it can be said that this role in a familial structure is by no means a novelty in the character make-up of the protagonist. Rather, the aspect of genealogy, along with the pursuit of Fama, is the tragic foundation on which the multi-faceted figure is built. It cannot be denied that the extent of revenge and the associated use of violence make Kratos appear as a “merciless, rage-filled genocide machine,”²⁹ however, the dimension of the (anti-) hero struggling for forgiveness for genealogical losses is also an essential part of the character even before GOW IV.

Before focusing on the heroic character’s portrayal of the figure in the following, the role of the prominent thing that is directly connected to his character depiction should be brought to the fore in preparation for this: the Chaos Blades. The presence or absence of the semantically highly charged weapon plays a central role, especially with the progressive shift of perspective to the heroic figure. At the same time, the bond between character depiction and central things is not a unique feature of the digital medium, nor is the connection of a hero figure to his weapon an exclusive specific, as will be briefly demonstrated by the duplicated Ring of Power in *SHADOW OF MORDOR* and the function of the ring in Hartmann’s von Aue *Iwein*.

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- 27 R  th, Antonia: “Wenn Helden sterben.   ber die Bedeutung des Todes f  r den griechischen Heros und seine Wiedergabe in Vasenbildern aus Athen,” in: *helden.heroes.heros*.*heros*.4.2(2016),pp.23-31,herep.25, DOI: 10.6094/helden.heros.heros./2016/02/03.
- 28 Kratos, in the role of father is already thematized in GOW III in connection with the character of Pandora, when he frees her from her captivity and hesitates when it turns out that he must sacrifice her to the flames of Olympus. While Pandora wants to sacrifice herself for Kratos, Kratos initially holds her back until the prospect of revenge, seemingly only to be realized through the girl’s death, dominates: “Ultimately, Kratos’ hatred towards Zeus proved greater than his desire to safeguard Pandora. Kratos lashed out at Zeus, while Pandora disappeared into the flames”: <https://godofwar.fandom.com/wiki/Pandora> [25 Mar. 2019]. For this reference I thank Robert Baumgartner.
- 29 G. Martin: “God of War Doesn’t Entirely Solve the Kratos Problem.”

SEMANTICS OF ITEMS AND THEIR FUNCTION— CHAOS BLADES AND RINGS OF POWER

As has already been shown in the course of events so far, the Chaos Blades are far more than mere instruments for combat, and are highly semantically charged. With Joachim Friedmann, one can speak of a “plot-functional object,” because it not only drives the plot forward as would be the case with a “McGuffin,”³⁰ but also contains, at the latest with GoW IV, the semantic-narrative opposition of the loss-laden past of an archaic hero vs. a broken father figure. The game director of GoW II and GoW IV, Cory Barlog, therefore summarizes Kratos’ initial change of arms in the latest spin-off of the game series as follows:

“I think we wanted to create an identity, because to me the blades represent a very dark time in [Kratos’] life. They are not just a weapon to him. They are his scarlet letter. They are the marking that somebody tricked him, that he made a bad deal, that he made a mistake. Powerful, but I think also powerfully charged in its emotion. [...] I think [a] part of him wanting to move forward is being able to [leave the blades behind].”³¹

With regard to the semiotics of the Spartan, the legibility of the body indicates the genealogical loss of his family, which the chaos blades represent—they testify to the unconditional will to preserve and increase one’s own *fama*, which is nothing unusual for a heroic figure, because “combative superiority and victoriousness [...] [are] heroic qualities,” as they can already be found in the depictions on Greek neck amphorae and drinking bowls of the 5th and 6th centuries BC.³² After the killing of his family, this urge to fight gives way to an absolute vendetta against Olympus and ends (at first) in the laying down of his blades. In GoW IV, he uses an axe as a weapon in large parts, but it still has the function of a tool at the beginning of the plot and only becomes a weapon along the way. It is only when another genealogical loss threatens in the form of his son’s illness that he must once again use his blades associated with the element of fire for his walk through frozen Helheim. Riley Little summarizes this moment as follows: “It’s a full-circle moment for the story of GOD OF WAR IV as Kratos is forced to wield the same

30 Friedmann, Joachim: *Storytelling for Media. Introduction to the Theory and Practice of Narrative Design*, Stuttgart: UVK Verlag 2021, p. 143.

31 <https://www.gamesradar.com/god-of-war-director-explains-why-kratos-lost-his-blades-and-got-an-axe-its-kinda-deep/> [04.06.2022]

32 A. Rüh: “Wenn Helden sterben. Über die Bedeutung des Todes für den griechischen Heros und seine Wiedergabe in Vasenbildern aus Athen,” p. 26.

weapon that took everything away from him in the original trilogy to save the one thing he has left—his son.”³³ At this moment, the portrayal of the hero as a hybrid figure itself enters into reflection via the weapon, and with it the character’s past, along with the negatively connoted dimensions associated with it, break into the narrative. The character’s multidimensionality is addressed from this point on until the end of the narrated story in his confrontation with his son and himself. While he wants to save Atreus from repeating the “cycle of patricide,”³⁴ in a sense he must now accept the hybridity of his own transtextual character make-up in continuation of the acceptance and forgiveness of his own guilt in GOW III. The schema of the exorbitant hero becomes the object of narrative reflection, making Kratos legible as he loosens the bandages over the arms scarred by the chains of the chaos blades to give them visibility.

As an integrated component of the game world, the character simultaneously reflects its tension of an aggressively ruthless and broken hero figure, which was established from the beginning of the GOW series. The hero, alien in the new space, copes with Bernd Bastert’s reflections on alien heroes “the saga memory”³⁵ of the saga world of the predecessors on which he is based and thus enables ludic recipients with prior knowledge of this substrate to readjust their perspective on the hero. This pre-eye-viewing of this more than archaic hero on both ludic and narrative levels seems to be the starting point for the widely shared perception of a ‘humanized’ hero that Kratos is supposed to represent in GOW IV.

From a transmedial point of view, this close connection between a semantically charged item and its expressiveness via the figure(s) that carries or possesses it is a prominent concept, which will be briefly demonstrated in the following by means of another example.

Without too much elaboration of the creation and contextual variables,³⁶ in SHADOW OF MORDOR, which is set in the Tolkien universe, a new ring of power is forged by the two protagonists Celebrimbor and Talion in ‘personal union.’ With

33 <https://screenrant.com/god-of-war-4-blades-of-chaos/>, from 04.06.2022.

34 https://godofwar.fandom.com/wiki/The_Cycle_of_Patricide, from 04.06.2022.

35 Bastert, Bernd: “Fremde Helden? Narrative Transcodierung und Konnexion des ‘Nibelungenlieds’ im mittelniederländischen ‘Nevelingenlied’,” in: Sahn, Heike/ Millet, Victor (eds.), *Narration and Hero, Ergänzungsbande zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* 87, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2014, pp. 385-402, here p. 394.

36 Cf. for further details: Nieser, Florian: “Die Macht Helden zu brechen,” <https://www.paidia.de/two-rings-to-break-them-all-zur-agency-des-neuen-rings-der-macht-in-shadow-of-war-und-der-zwei-ringe-im-mittelalterlichen-iwein/> [04.06.2022]

the final hammer blow, the spirit of the elf Celebrimbor separates from the human ranger Talion for a short time. As the ranger's injuries successively return to life-threatening levels previously experienced during his execution at the Black Gate, the elf stands at the anvil. With the completion of the Ring as a manifestation of the spirit of vengeance, it is now apparently possible for this spirit to take physical form for a short time. The ring is thus more than a (symbolic) representation of the owner.³⁷ At the same time, the separation of the previously fused figures exposes the fragility of Talion, who is kept alive only by Celebrimbor's magic—either in 'personal union' or by wearing the ring as a "repository"³⁸ of the ring smith's power. This first indicator of an ominously close bond between Talion and the Ring foreshadows the Ranger's inevitable fate as Celebrimbor's tool.

Over several stages of the story, the tension between the power-hungry elf and Talion, who is bound to the magic of the ring, grows, and Talion becomes aware of the growing lust for power of the ring smith who takes possession of him.³⁹ The turning point of this fateful bond is Talion's first independent and, at the same

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- 37 Fürbeth, Frank: "rinc und vingerfin in der deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters. Unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Guldein vingerlein des Mönchs von Salzburg und Heinrich Wittenweilers Ring," in: Anna Mühlherr et al. (eds.), *Dingkulturen. Objekte in Literatur, Kunst und Gesellschaft der Vormoderne. Literatur-Theorie-Geschichte*. 9, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2016, pp. 406-442, here p. 427. This also parallels the One Ring of Sauron and its physical presence tied to the ring.
- 38 McGregor, Jamie: "Two rings to rule them all. A comparative study of Tolkien and Wagner," in: Friedrich, Michael/Velten, HansRudolf (eds.), *Technikender Sympathiesteuerung in Erzähltexten der Vormoderne*, Heidelberg: Winter 2016, pp. 125-143, here p. 138.
- 39 In addition to game mechanic enhancements of the predecessor, the power of mind control is the central feature of the new ring. It allows Celebrimbor and Talion to instrumentalize even high-ranking fighters in Sauron's army and recruit their own army in this way. With the growth of his own army and the conquered fortresses, the elf's hunger for power grows. The topic of game mechanics is discussed in its reflexive function as an essential element of game influence and agency in "The ludic Recipient as Ringbearer;" a comparison of the greatly expanded skill tree of the character Talion in *SoW* in conjunction with the game mechanic anchoring of the new ring as another slot of the inventory cannot be done here. On the subject of game mechanics, we refer to Philipp Bojahr's and Michelle Hertes' recent contribution: Bojahr, Philipp/Herte, Michelle: "Spielmechanik," in: Beil, Benjamin/ Hensel, Thomas/ Rauscher, Andreas (eds.), *Game Studies. Film, Fernsehen, Neue Medien*. Wiesbaden: Springer 2018, pp. 235-250, here pp. 235-249.

time, last decision. He decides against Celebrimbor's intended subjugation of a Ringwraith and former king of men by killing him before he succumbs to the Elf's will; he should not become a 'slave' of Celebrimbor.⁴⁰ Enraged, Celebrimbor clarifies what the player has long suspected: this decision is not Talion's to make. The Ranger is nothing more than a 'vessel' of his will—a physical extension of his ring. He then leaves Talion's body, who immediately collapses and succumbs to his injuries, as he did at the beginning of Mount Doom.

These events lead to the following conclusion: With the binding of Talion to the magic of the Ring—the manifestation of Celebrimbor's will—the progressive 'erosion' of the Ranger begins. Although the Ring has two bearers at the same time, the principle of the influence of the One Ring of Power in the Tolkien universe continues to apply: the Ring allows only one true bearer, while it crushes the will of all other owners and binds them to the owner of the One Ring. Talion meets just this fate, because in *SHADOW OF WAR* (SOW)⁴¹ he is nothing more than the physical shell of the ring smith, whose fingers hold the ring.⁴²

Talion in SOW is a broken hero in the sense of a tool whose last autonomous act is the crafting of that thing whose magical 'agency' gradually takes over the Ranger's ability to act. The close bond with the Ring wears down Talion's identity as a fighter of Gondor and pushes him into the role of the Ringwraith of Celebrimbor. A release from the Ring and its magic, in turn, means the hero's (temporary) death.⁴³ Both Rings of Power in *SHADOW OF MORDOR* (SOM)⁴⁴ and SOW show parallels in the relationship between 'auxiliary blacksmith' and magic ring: While

40 This Ringwraith is Isildur, who, in a sense, succumbed to Sauron's will after the fact, despite the loss of the Ring. Besides Helm Hammerhand, Isildur is the second newly introduced Ringwraith, which represents a deviation from the Ringwraiths in Tolkien's stories. It can be assumed that it is the encounter of Talion (fighter of Gondor) with Isildur (king of Gondor) as Ringwraith, which is the trigger for the open resistance of Talion against Celebrimbor.

41 *SHADOW OF WAR* (USA 2017, Monolith; Warner Bros. Entertainment).

42 Talion's moment of realization probably does not coincidentally coincide with the moment when another fighter of Gondor is to be forced under the will of the Ringwraith. Within the narrative, the Ringwraith Isildur functions, as it were, as a figure-conceptual mirror image, reflecting Talion's own broken agency as Celebrimbor's tool.

43 Talion puts on the ring of Isildur shortly before his death and changes from the ring spirit of Celebrimbor to the ring spirit of Sauron—in the end he does not succeed in saving his ability to act and finally becomes the servant of Sauron.

44 *SHADOW OF MORDOR* (USA 2014, Monolith; Warner Bros. Entertainment).

Celebrimbor in SOM binds part of his power to Sauron's ring and cannot assert his ability to act against him, Talion forfeits his ability to act with the creation of the new ring and can only choose between his own death and existence as a Ringwraith.

IWEIN, TALION AND KRATOS—CONNECTION OF SEMANTIC ITEMS AND THE CONSTITUTION OF IDENTITY

Continuing to look at the comparison with rings from the Tolkien universe, it seems obvious to include Iwein as the protagonist in Hartmann's von Aue text of the same name in the comparison, since he is also a ring bearer. He is even in possession of a ring that makes him invisible like the ringbearers in the *Lord of the Rings* (LOTR). But with regard to SOW, this remains the only commonality.

Iwein receives the 'invisibility ring' from Lunete, the chambermaid of Queen Laudine. Since Iwein is responsible for the death of Laudine's husband Ascalon, he is wanted at court as a murderer, where Iwein is only staying because he desperately wanted to wrest a trophy from the king.⁴⁵ In this precarious situation, Lunete hands him the ring with the words:

*"Ir sult vor schaden sicher sîn:
Herre Iwein, nemt hin diz vingerlîn.
Ez ist umbe den stein alsô gewant:
Swer in hât in blôzer hant,
den mac niemen, al die vrist
unz er in blôzer hant ist,
gesehn noch vinden."*

(vv. 1204-1207)⁴⁶

45 Mühlherr, Anna: "Die 'Macht der Ringe.' Ein Beitrag zur Frage, wie sympathisch man Iwein finden darf," in: Friedrich, Michael/ Velten, Hans Rudolf (eds.), *Techniken der Sympathiesteuerung in Erzähltexten der Vormoderne*, Heidelberg: Winter 2016, pp. 125-143, here p. 131.

46 "You will be safe from harm: / Lord Iwein, take this ring. / With its stone it behaves thus: / whoever turns it inward in the bare hand, / no one can / see or discover." My translation.

Thus, Iwein manages to escape the men of Ascalon who are looking for him, but it is not his own achievement. He owes it to Lunete and especially to the magic ring, that he escapes alive.⁴⁷

Iwein's integrity is closely linked to the magic of the ring, which is provided to him by another character. This dependency was triggered by his pursuit of Ascalon, whom he wanted to defeat once and for all. Looking at SoW, Lunete's ring protects Iwein's integrity and preserves his ability to act while Talion's physical integrity no longer does and can only be preserved by the magic of the Elvish ring. The obvious parallel between Iwein as the bearer of the Invisibility Ring and Talion is that both rings provide for the survival of their bearers; however, only Celebrimbor's ring has a binding effect: in contrast to the Invisibility Ring, the magical effect of the Elvish ring requires the renunciation of agency for the protection of Talion.

However, Iwein receives a second ring.⁴⁸ It comes from Laudine, who in the meantime has become Iwein's wife through the mediation of Lunete. Iwein wants to go on a tournament journey shortly after the wedding, whereupon Laudine gives him her consent, but in this context entrusts Iwein with a second ring, which in its function as a "pledge of loyalty"⁴⁹ has a binding character:

47 Lunete's motivation for giving the ring to Iwein in return for an earlier achievement of the knight at Arthur's court, where she alone received recognition from Iwein, is presented in detail in Mühlherr's essay: A. Mühlherr: "Die 'Macht der Ringe,' Ein Beitrag zur Frage, wie sympathisch man Iwein finden darf," p. 131.

48 It should be pointed out that the research also represents the position that it is not a second ring but the same ring Cf. Bertau, Karl: "Der Ritter auf dem halben Pferd oder die Wahrheit der Hyperbel," in: *PBB* 116 (1994), pp. 285-301. Thereby he assumes that both rings as well as their owners are "structural doubles": *Ibid.*, p. 290f. Due to the strongly varying mechanisms of action of both rings, as shown in this paper, such an assumption cannot be accepted.

49 A. Mühlherr: "Die 'Macht der Ringe,' Ein Beitrag zur Frage, wie sympathisch man Iwein finden darf," p. 140.

"Hiute ist der ahte tac
Nâch sunwenden:
Der sol diu jârzal enden.
So kumt benamen ode ê,
ode ichn warte iu niht mê.
Unde lât ditz vingerlîn
Einen geziuc der rede sîn."
 (vv. 2940-2946)⁵⁰

In this case, it is less a matter of Iwein's physical integrity than of his reputation as guardian of the 'well kingdom' and minneritter⁵¹ of Laudine. The magical effect of this 'Minnering'⁵² consists above all in giving the wearer continual luck and well-being (*senften muot*; v. 2954) including on a tournament travel.⁵³ Iwein—apparently still inspired by the same impulse that made him chase after Ascalon—goes to numerous tournaments and achieves a high degree of prestige (*êre*) at Arthur's court. He fails to meet the deadline set by Laudine, whereupon it is Lunete who, as Laudine's messenger, accuses Iwein of being a traitor before Arthurian society. She reminds him of the gift of the first ring that saved his life and emphasizes how much she regrets this gift (vv. 3143-3150). She then insults him as a faithless man, banishes him from his kingdom in the name of Laudine, cancels the bond with his wife (vv. 3160-3196) and pulls the ring from Iwein's finger.

This time the loss of Laudine's ring has fatal consequences: Iwein falls into madness in the face of the reproaches and the breaking of all *êre*-generating ties symbolically realized in the removal of the ring (vv. 3201-3233). He tears off his clothes and runs into the wilderness (vv. 3234-3238).

Iwein's second ring exhibits familiar structures: An unconditional attachment to the ring becomes clear, which at the same time can be understood as a manifestation of the original owner. In Iwein, the loss of the ring is also tied to the expiration of a time limit. The ring is only temporarily a gift of minne that reminds of loyalty; with the missing of the deadline and the loss of the ring, the destructive effect of the unmagical binding to this thing unfolds: the threat to the identity of

50 "Today is the eighth day / after the solstice, / at this time the annual period shall end. / So come by then or before, / or I will wait for you no more. / And let this ring / be witness to the bargain." My translation.

51 This translates generously as 'a courting knight.'

52 A ring as a ding-like proxy for the bond between the two figures.

53 A. Mühlherr: "Die 'Macht der Ringe,' Ein Beitrag zur Frage, wie sympathisch man Iwein finden darf," speaks on p. 139 of the second ring making Iwein "literally shine."

the knight Iwein. Based on the knight's self-image as part of a community from which he is now torn, Iwein's "social death"⁵⁴ is, in the context of the medium in question, a fate just as devastating as Talion's physical death.

Although Iwein and Talion can only be related to each other to a limited extent as figures in their respective medial and action-related contexts, both agree on one point: Talion and Iwein are broken heroic figures whose ability to act is decisively tied to the rings of which they are the bearers.

Neither succeeds in asserting their character conception against the power of the rings they wear: Talion wants to use the new Ring of Power as an *equally* magical thing against Sauron, but the magic of the Ring appropriates Talion and he ends up as the Ringwraith of Celebrimbor. The Minnering exerts a similar negative influence on Iwein, for his tournament aspirations are indirectly carried along by the Minnering's magical effect, causing him to miss the deadline. Only after the deadline has passed does the carefreeness of the tournament journey promoted by the ring (*dô wâren sie beide* [Iwein and Gawein, F.N.] / *mit vreuden sunder leide* / *von einem turnei komen*; vv. 3059f.)⁵⁵ give way to the horrified awareness that he has forgotten Laudine (*nû kom mîn her Iwein* / *in einem seneden gedanc*: / *er gedâhte, daz twelen waere ze lanc*, / *daz er von sînem wibe tete*; vv. 3082).⁵⁶

Talion is thus broken *from within*, as it were, for he forfeits a large part of his ability to act for his survival in his binding to the magic of the Ring of Power, which makes him continually the executing hand of Celebrimbor's lust for power. Iwein's attachment to the ring, in turn, is generated primarily by Laudine's setting of a deadline associated with it; the magic of the ring, however, promotes the missing of the deadline and plunges Iwein into madness with the loss of the ring of mines. With Lunete's taking of the ring, Iwein is broken *from the outside*, in contrast to Talion.

The loss of the ring has fatal consequences in both cases: Talion realizes his powerlessness, slips Isildur's ring over his finger, and surrenders to a fate he had vehemently tried to prevent a short time before. Iwein falls into madness and flees from society. Both ring bearers share the same fate, but under different omens: Talion loses his identity through the accession of the new Ring of Power, Iwein suffers the loss of identity through the loss of his second ring.

The strong bond of the respective identity constitution is shared by the bearers of the respective rings and by the bearer of the Chaos Blades, Kratos. The latter

54 Ibid., p. 141: Iwein is "socially finished."

55 "Now they had both come / in unalloyed joy / from a tournament." My translation.

56 "Suddenly my lord Iwein / was overcome by longing thoughts: / it occurred to him that he had extended the absence / from his wife too long." My translation.

continues to carry the scars of the weapons previously chained to his arms even after the (temporary) discarding of his weapons. At the same time, this reveals another dimension of meaning of semantically charged items, for they can here exemplarily not only contain pure narrative oppositions such as powerful vs. powerless or preservation vs. loss of formative identity characteristics, but they also stand out clearly in the readability of the respective figures. Iwein loses his social status along with his clothing, Talon again suffers his deep and mortal wounds, which, like the scars of the Spartan, are directly linked to genealogical loss. Items of power, or powerful items, are thus not only formative for the identity of their wearers, but also, in a very real sense, for the legibility of their owners beyond their loss or absence.

Having thus shown, on the basis of the dimensions of effect of semantic items, that they can be transmedial markers of character constitution and can highlight essential aspects of character formation, it is now to be noted again, with a focus on Kratos, that behind the rampant violence of the Spartan and new god of war, there is above all genealogical loss and guilt. Following on from this, the question of the character conception of Kratos as a *humanized* hero figure in GOW IV will now be addressed. For this purpose, the figure of the Spartan will be examined in more detail from a structuralist and semiotic perspective.

COMPLEXITY OR HUMANIZATION OF A HEROIC FIGURE? AN APPROACH TO THE CONSTITUTION OF THE KRATOS FIGURE

From GOW I-IV, the central hero figure exhibits characteristics for the recipient with anticipated prior knowledge⁵⁷—that is, with the knowledge of the previously described events that place an aloof, brutal demigod blinded by vengefulness on the one hand next to a “father, a broken man, and a betrayed man”⁵⁸ on the other.

57 On the role of expected prior knowledge in character conception cf. a.o. F. Nieser: *Die Lesbarkeit von Helden. Uneindeutige Zeichen in der ‘Bataille d’Aliscans’ und dem ‘Willehalm’ Wolframs von Eschenbach*, pp. 2-23; E. Lienert: “Aspekte der Figurenkonstitution in mittelhochdeutscher Heldenepik,” p. 51, with reference to Jannidis, Fotis: *Figur und Person. Beitrag zu einer historischen Narratologie*, 2. Auflage, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2017, and Schulz, Armin: *Erzähltheorie in mediävistischer Perspektive*, De Gruyter 2012, p. 330.

58 M. Kriska: “God of War: You Were Wrong About Kratos,” n.p.

Looking at older depictions of heroic figures, for instance from Middle High German heroic epic, such a possibly irritating complexity of seemingly one-dimensional heroic figures is nothing unusual. Elisabeth Lienert lists as essential characteristics of heroes in pre-modern narrative, among others, the “name, [...], characteristics and expressions of affect [and] their history, occasionally their fama and/or traditional role specifications.”⁵⁹ With regard to Kratos, it is of particular interest that a “severely limited inner world representation, contradictory valuations, lack of coherence” are essential components of a heroic figure’s actions.⁶⁰ Whereas in GoW I-III the Spartan’s inner world is only hinted at through the passages depicted or described in a heroic epic manner by a narrator’s voice, in GoW IV Kratos’ son Atreus takes over this function. He functions as a gauge of Kratos’ inner state—for example, when Kratos tries to conceal his past from his son, which manifests itself physically in his son’s illness, can only be cured completely by Kratos through acceptance of his deeds and identity vis-à-vis Atreus. Moreover, with the move from the mythical space of Greece to the mythical space of Scandinavia, the hero figure acquires a transtextual character.⁶¹ This means, above all, that she becomes a ‘hybrid figure’ composed of at least two layers—that of the single text and that of the saga.⁶² Prior knowledge of GoW IV’s predecessors becomes the saga of the embittered god of war from Greece, which at the same time opens up the possibility of now reweighing the character’s narrative. A prominent example from Middle High German heroic epic would be Siegfried, whose mythical past as dragon slayer and conqueror of the Nibelungen hoard plays only a

59 E. Lienert: “Aspekte der Figurenkonstitution in mittelhochdeutscher Heldenepik,” p. 52.

60 Ibid., p. 52f.

61 Moreover, from a literary perspective, she moves into a space whose 9th-11th century skaldic poetry focuses on anger, revenge, and fear of the adversaries as central characteristics of the heroic Viking leaders. According to Diana Whaley, a tendency of a ‘naturalization’ of violence can be seen, for example, in that the element of fire deponentiates human agency in the form of ruthless violence against families (Whaley, Diana: “The Fury of the Northmen and the Poetics of Violence,” in Heike Sahlm/Victor Millet (eds.), *Narration and Hero, Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* 87, De Gruyter 2014, pp. 71-94, here p. 81). In any case, this aspect of the change of space, together with the circumstances of the killing of Kratos’ family and their burning in the context of a village plundering, fits very well into the new accentuation of the protagonist and his coming to terms with the past.

62 E. Lienert: “Aspekte der Figurenkonstitution in mittelhochdeutscher Heldenepi,” p. 55.

subordinate role in the *Nibelungenlied*. His identity as knight and courtly wooer of Kriemhild takes center stage.⁶³ Both aspects are part of Siegfried's character make-up, but the emphasis is initially on the hero's knightly identity. This mythical substrate does find its way back into the plot, which becomes particularly clear in the hero's exorbitance in (competitive) battle.

The re-staging of the GOD OF WAR in GOW IV seems to work in a similar way. From the very beginning, the current installment of the game series focuses on an element that was only partially introduced in the predecessors and reminds us of the hero's broken side: the hero's mourning—now for his dead/killed second wife Faye. In contrast to the opening of GOW I-III, there is no confrontation at the beginning with overpowering and mythical adversaries like the Hydra in GOW I or the sea god Poseidon; instead, he buries Faye along with Atreus. While the legibility of the now transtextual hero figure as an "epic substrate"⁶⁴ reminds the player of the hero's past in the previous games and is able to reactualize it at the moment of the burning body, this time Faye's ashes become the object of *memoria*, of her. At the same time, her mortal remains take on a central motivating function for the further course of the game, since the goal of GOW IV is to scatter her ashes on the highest mountain of the *Nine Realms*. For the first time, it's not primarily about a revenge plot and overcoming guilt—it's about traveling to an exposed point of the new space together with a companion character.⁶⁵ From the

63 Ibid., p. 56.

64 B. Bastert: "Fremde Helden? Narrative Transcodierung und Konnexion des 'Nibelungenlieds' im mittelniederländischen 'Nevelingenlied'," p. 394. By this he understands allusions in Middle High German texts to earlier or parallel saga traditions, which can only be inferred by recipients who have knowledge from these traditions.

65 References to John Campbell's Hero's Journey as its updating adaptation by Christopher Vogler in *The Writer's Journey* are obvious here, especially in the form presented by Robert Cassar in his narrative analysis of the first three GOW parts. He divides the individual stages of the hero's journey into three acts: "Act 1—By this he understands allusions in Middle High German texts to earlier or parallel saga traditions, which can only be inferred by recipients who have knowledge from these traditions. Departure/Separation," "Act 2—Descent Initiation, Penetration" and "Act 3—Return" (Cassar, Robert: "God of War: A Narrative Analysis," in: *Eludamos. Journal for Computer GameCulture*, H.7/1(2013), pp.81-99, <http://www.eludamos.org/index.php/eludamos/article/viewArticle/vol7no1-5/7-1-5-html>). These are precisely the stages through which Kratos passes, not only in GOW I-III, as Cassar points out, but also in a very clear form in GOW IV, when, after setting out, the father and son team face multiple challenges and battles with mythical

very beginning, a new emphasis is placed: The initial staging of the Spartan succeeds via mourning (for his deceased wife), remorse, and atonement (symbolized by the inferred discarding of the iconic Chaos Blades).⁶⁶ In GoW IV, the tragic facet of the Spartan's character make-up is central.

However, these first semiotic and dramaturgical indicators of a new focus from a heroic perspective do not yet clarify the question as to what extent it is possible to make a heroic, yet broken, hero 'approachable.' To answer this question, ancient and Middle High German heroic representations and heroic schemes will first be examined according to their meaning and function, in order to be able to establish references to the figure conception of the Spartan on this basis.

THE HERO AS AN IDENTIFICATION FIGURE

In the following, it will primarily be shown that heroes were not only understood as outstanding and unattainable figures, but have offered a form of reception-side identification potential since antiquity. Ralf van den Hoff, referring to pictorial representations of heroes on the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi, on vases, and on other media, points out that "[P]ersonal identification with the figures depicted in architectural sculpture must have been another important factor in their reception."⁶⁷ From a narrative as well as a ludic perspective, GoW IV understands how to mobilize this identification potential anew in comparison to the anti-hero structure of its predecessors, while the fundamentally complex structure of the figure remains unchanged even against the background of ancient and medieval concepts of heroes.

In very general terms, heroic figures in antiquity as well as in the Middle Ages function as 'repositories' of an identity-forming past of the cultural collective that tells itself their stories.⁶⁸ They exhibit special characteristics such as the hero's

creatures such as trolls and dragons before returning to the starting point of their journey after completing their task.

66 In addition, the axe is not introduced as a weapon, but as a tool that only becomes a weapon in the course of the game.

67 van den Hoff: *Media for Theseus*, 2010, p. 163.

68 Cf. e.g., van den Hoff, Ralf: "Media for Theseus. Or: the different images of the Athenian polis-hero," in: Linn Foxhall et al. (eds.), *Intentional History. Spinning Time in Ancient Greece*, Franz Steiner, 2010, pp. 161-188, here p. 161; E. Lienert: *Mittelhochdeutsche Heldenepik. Eine Einführung*, p. 9-23.

closeness to the gods⁶⁹ or divine[] parent[s]⁷⁰ and are, at their core, a man[s] of extraordinary ability and extraordinary commitment, surpassing the measure of the ordinary.⁷¹ They spend most of their lives in combat with adversaries of a human or superhuman nature.⁷² Elisabeth Lienert emphasizes, however, that “Morally exemplary his [i.e., the hero’s, F.N.] actions are often not; cruelty and ruthlessness, betrayal and murder are [...] also the order of the day.”⁷³ R  th speaks of the fact that heroes can also be “morally corrupt.”⁷⁴ All these characteristics, that can also be found in Kratos, initially serve less an (intended) identification of the recipient with the heroic hero figure, but rather the manifestation of “incommensurable exorbitance.”⁷⁵ At the same time, however, structures can be discerned in the pictorial representation of heroes in antiquity that, for example, allow heroes to become the alter ego of the common foot soldier. Marion Meyer distinguishes between “non-narrative and narrative images”⁷⁶ using the example of the representation of warrior salvage in the period between the 7th and 5th century BC on neck amphorae, a volute crater, a small master bowl and on eye bowls, among others. Narrative images thus refer to traditional heroic narratives and thus traditional scenes—in the context of the Aithiopis and the Lesser Iliad, the image represents the warrior recovery of Aias, who carries the body of Achilles from the battlefield.⁷⁷ At the same time, however, Meyer is able to deduce that this explicit

69 A. R  th: “Wenn Helden sterben.   ber die Bedeutung des Todes f  r den griechischen Heros und seine Wiedergabe in Vasenbildern aus Athen,” p. 26; also Cf. Centner, Jasmin: “R  ckkehr eines Helden? Odysseus als mythische Identifikationsfigur in Primo Levis ‘Die Atempause’,” in: *helden.heroes.h  ros* 5.1 (2017), pp. 59-69. DOI: 10.6094/helden.heroes.heros./2017/01/07, p. 61.

70 Meyer, Marion: “Der Heros als alter ego des Kriegers in archaischer und klassischer Zeit. Bilder im Wandel,” in: *Antike Kunst* 55 (2012), pp. 25-51, here p. 25.

71 E Lienert: *Mittelhochdeutsche Heldenepik. Eine Einf  hrung*, p. 9.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid., p. 9f.

74 A. R  th: “Wenn Helden sterben.   ber die Bedeutung des Todes f  r den griechischen Heros und seine Wiedergabe in Vasenbildern aus Athen,” p. 28.

75 Friedrich, Udo: “Held und Narrativ. Zur narrativen Funktion des Heros in der mittelalterlichen Literatur,” in: Heike Sahn/Victor Millet (eds.), *Narration and Hero. Erg  nzungsb  nde zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* 87, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2014, p. 61.

76 M. Meyer: “Der Heros als alter ego des Kriegers in archaischer und klassischer Zeit. Bilder im Wandel,” p. 26.

77 Ibid., p. 26.

horizon of reference changes in non-narrative representations, as lifeworld references are added to the “classical pictorial composition” of the warrior retrieval. Achilles and Aias are replaced by “anonymous figures” such as athletes or warriors, as well as the oikos of the anonymous warrior in the form of female figures who bid farewell to the fighter or mournfully receive his corpse.⁷⁸ She concludes, “With the presence of non-combatants, the focus of the images shifts. Viewers are reminded that the fallen warrior is received and mourned by his oikos.”⁷⁹ By linking the representation of heroes back to the context of societal values and realities of individuals’ lives, heroic figures are already multidimensional in this classical pictorial dimension. They possess narrative potential on a scene potentially familiar to the classical recipient, illustrating the outstanding martial qualities of the two figures depicted. At the same time, they point beyond themselves and possess (archaic) social identification potential through their reference to the oikos—they are to a certain extent ‘approachable.’ Meyer pointedly formulates, every image of Achilles is necessarily also that of a man.⁸⁰

However, not only ancient heroes, regardless of their exorbitance, can become *approachable* in the representation as social reference figures, but also heroic figures of Middle High German heroic epic. In the narration of these figures, political aspects or the adequate representation of their historical models play less of a role; rather, complex historical events of the Germanic *heroic age* are reduced to human affects, motives and conflicts.⁸¹ Udo Friedrich points out that heroic epic addresses the “intrusion of contingency above any subject theme”.⁸² He agrees with Lienert that heroic narratives primarily contain, discuss, and reflect certain “narrative cores”; these include, among others, genealogy, finding identity, love.⁸³ The central feature of heroic narratives is thus the “disruption of normality,” which can be brought on by “betrayal and revenge.”⁸⁴ The assignment of the narrated events of the GOW series to heroic epic with its focus on such narrative cores is obvious—with consequences for the readability of Kratos. Epic hero figures serve as exaggerated guiding figures unaffected by everyday contingency. They serve as the foundation of a collectively handed-down memory of a particular cultural social

78 Ibid., p. 31.

79 Ibid., p. 33.

80 Ibid., p. 36.

81 E. Lienert: *Mittelhochdeutsche Heldenepik. Eine Einführung*, p. 9f., citation: p. 10.

82 U. Friedrich: “Held und Narrativ. Zur narrativen Funktion des Heros in der mittelalterlichen Literatur,” p. 176.

83 Ibid., p. 178.

84 Ibid., p. 181.

formation, and thus function as an uncapturable guiding image in their entire figure system. The exorbitant hero is thus “an imaginary double of man.”⁸⁵ It is precisely with such an exaggerated representation of heroic figures that the negotiation of narrative cores in contingency situations is made possible—a form of identification is thus a necessary component of the portrayal of a heroic figure in order to come to terms with the characteristics and events it represents.

For an archaic hero to be ‘humanized,’ as is done by the media landscape for Kratos in the new GoW IV, the recipient’s empathy with the character in addition to identification with it is necessary. From the perspective of literary studies, and Verena Barthel, it can be stated that the value horizons opened up in the text and in the narrative of the digital game are equally as important for directing the empathy of the recipient as their knowledge of the inner world of the character, gained through (narrated or depicted) facial expressions and gestures or through an inner view granted by the narrator.⁸⁶ It is a characteristic of epic heroes, however, that an insight into the inner world is granted only in exceptional cases.⁸⁷ The situation is similar with Kratos, whose emotions in GoW I–III are primarily driven by anger and revenge. Guilt and shame are only inferred by the brief sequences in which he is confronted with the loss of his family. Together with the “primacy effect”⁸⁸ in GoW I, in whose first scene Kratos is introduced as a broken hero trying to end his life, he is a complex character from the beginning despite his violent, misogynistic and morally questionable acts of violence.⁸⁹ The re-actualization of the

85 Ibid., p. 183 with reference to Müller-Funk, Wolfgang: *Die Kultur und ihre Narrative. Eine Einführung*, Wien/New York: Springer 2008, p. 119.

86 Barthel, Verena: “Empathie, Mitleid, Sympathie. Rezeptionslenkende Strukturen mittelalterlicher Texte am Beispiel des Willehalm-Stoffs,” in: *Quellen und Forschungen zur Literatur- und Kulturgeschichte* 50 (284), Berlin: De Gruyter 2008, p. 31–54.

87 E. Lienert: *Figurenkonstitution*. 2016, p. 52.

88 V. Barthel: “Empathie, Mitleid, Sympathie. Rezeptionslenkende Strukturen mittelalterlicher Texte am Beispiel des Willehalm-Stoffs,” p. 67, understands by this the special weight of the first impression of a figure, which is based on its first conception and is later difficult to revise.

89 Cf. on sexism in games also in relation to GoW, see: Batchelor, James: “Games need to tell better stories that don’t oversimplify oppression,” Interview mit Anita Sarkeesian, in: *gamesindustry.biz*. 19.05.2017; Gertz, Nolan: “#GamerGate. Is It About Misogyny or Ethical Journalism? Why Not Both?,” in: *abc*, 21.11.2014, <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/gamergate---is-it-about-misogyny-or-ethical-journalism-why-not-b/10098830>; Neurkar, Martin: “In Defense of a violent, misogynistic serialkiller,” in: *Game Architecture*, 14.10.2012,

genealogical loss which, as an empathy-directing structure, blends the one raving with vengeance with the one mourning can be seen as a stylistic feature of the GoW series.

THE GOD OF WAR IN AN ALIEN WORLD— LIMITED AUTOMACY AS EMPATHY FACTOR

In the mythical setting of Greek antiquity, which is no stranger to narratives of betrayal, revenge, and guilt, no historically complex pasts are negotiated, but culture-specific narrative cores are. While GoW I-III focus on questions about the extent of vigilante justice, how to deal with and cope with guilt, and the (divine) egocentrism of acts of revenge, GoW IV addresses and stages the opposite. From the very beginning, the question of avoiding guilt and appropriately coping with grief is being discussed, along with the (modern) question of the autonomy of the exorbitant hero. Thus, the negotiated horizon of values and the “axiology of values”⁹⁰ represented by the hero figure moves into the horizon of meaning of contemporary recipients. Predecessor games, on the other hand, did not strive for integrability into a current horizon of values, and rather focused on a pre-modern archaic heroic epic with a clearly staged anti-hero position.⁹¹ For the ludic recipient, this is especially true if the fictionalization of game logic as [hero] characters translates into additional forms of emotional participation in the game events.⁹² Empathy-generating structures of the text medium can thus also be thought of in the digital medium through the interactive aspect with the represented world using the game character.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20151001070630/http://www.gamearch.com/2012/10/14/in-defense-of-a-violent-misogynistic-serial-killer>; Joho, Jess: “‘God of War’ depicts the disease and destruction of toxic masculinity,” in: *Mashable*, 26.04.2018, <https://mashable.com/article/god-of-war-fatherhood-patriarchy-destruction-male-power-fantasy>

- 90 U. Friedrich: “Held und Narrativ. Zur narrativen Funktion des Heros in der mittelalterlichen Literatur,” p. 179.
- 91 On a ludic level, the distinction from this antihero position is conditioned by the fact that in ‘player character,’ as the “interface of the player’s interaction with the game world, game goals become personal goals of fictional beings.” Schröter, Felix: “Figur,” in: Benjamin Beil et al. (ed.), *Game Studies. Film, Fernsehen, Neue Medien*, Springer 2018, pp. 109.
- 92 F. Schröter: “Figur,” p. 110.

The aspect of limited autonomy, which stands in stark contrast to the Spartan's unstoppable *rise* to the status of GOD OF WAR until the destruction of Olympus in GoW I-III, is staged on several levels in terms of game mechanics. Kratos is still a stranger to the new environment of Scandinavia, which is especially evident in that he needs his son to translate all the runes and saga tablets of Norse mythology. Kratos is unfamiliar with the composition and the partly confrontational approach of the Norse world of gods, which is why Baldur, who repeatedly seeks to confront the Spartan as a stranger in his own world, is referred to as "the Stranger" for a very long duration of the play. There is no explanatory narrative voice; recipient and character knowledge are internally focalized. By foregoing an authorial narrator and replacing it with Atreus and then another NPC—similar to an authorial narrator—named Mimir, Kratos gradually gains knowledge about the world he is concurrently in with the player. In addition, "character-related information [and] information carriers integrated into the game world" can only be deciphered by Atreus and the later companion Mimir.⁹³ The (game) character Kratos cannot see through and classify the game world⁹⁴ on his own; therefore, it is opened up by the player and the game character together. The narrative and the ludic modes of reception move closer together through this limited autonomy of world exploration.⁹⁵ At the same time, the narrative and ludic emotions evoked in the receptive process are joined. According to Felix Schröter, ludic emotions arise through the "players' own actions in the game and [the] confrontation with its rule system"—a typical emotion here is "curiosity (for example, when exploring the game world)."⁹⁶ Narrative emotions, on the other hand, arise from the dramaturgical staging of the game world as well as the "short-circuiting" of character and player goals, in which the assumption of an active action role as well as an audiovisual or ideological character perspective plays a central role.⁹⁷ Through this new emphasis in GoW IV, compared to its predecessors, a game goal that enables the

93 F. Schröter: "Figur," p. 114.

94 Cf. Rauscher, Andreas. "Raum," in: Beil, Benjamin et al. (ed.), *Game Studies. Film, Fernsehen, Neue Medien*, Springer 2018, pp. 3-26.

95 Cf. on modes of reception Fahlenbrach, Kathrin/ Schröter, Felix: "Game Studies und Rezeptionsästhetik," in: Sachs-Hombach, Klaus/ Thon, Jan-Noel (eds.), *Game Studies. Aktuelle Ansätze der Computerspielforschung*, Köln: von Halem 2015, pp. 165-208.

96 F. Schröter: "Figur," p. 118.

97 Ibid., p. 117f.

aforementioned ‘short circuit’ based on “empathetic perspective-taking” is formulated.⁹⁸

With C. Klimmt et. al. the “counterempathy”⁹⁹ of the recipient evoked in GOW I-III is turned into its opposite. At the same time, autonomy in the fulfillment of the task in GOW IV is complicated by an alien world, making the ludic element of curiosity in spatial exploration a basic requirement for the fulfillment of the game’s goal which is based on narrative emotions. However, this becomes possible only as a function of the companion character Atreus, highlighting the threat of another loss of a family member for Kratos in GOW IV, implied in the narrative, and constituting a threat to the actual progress of the game. In a sense, the restaged tragedy of the broken hero figure catches up with the ludic recipient in this way, moving into the center the tragedy of the hero figure at both the narrative and ludic levels. It is not for nothing that the impending death of his son causes the proverbial walk through Helheim. In this episode, it is exclusively the past of Kratos that is reactualized. Above all, the threat of a limited autonomy of the (Greek) gods, who are unable to break out of the “circle of patricide,”¹⁰⁰ is addressed.¹⁰¹ This threat catches up with Kratos once again at the end of GOW IV, when he discovers the image of himself lying lifeless in his son’s lap on a wall along with a prophecy that is consistent with previous events.

GOW shows itself here exemplarily for digital games “as a highly self-reflexive medium,”¹⁰² which on a narrative and ludic level brings together the action spectrum of player and game character through the aspect of limited autonomy. This means that despite third-person perspective, through strong linkage of

98 Ibid., p. 117.

99 Hefner, Dorothée/ Klimmt, Christoph/ Vorderer, Peter: “The Video Game Experience as ‘True’ Identification: A Theory of Enjoyable Alterations of Players’ Self-Perception,” in: *Communication Theory* 19 (2009), pp. 351-373.

100 https://godofwar.fandom.com/wiki/The_Cycle_of_Patricide [04.06.2022].

101 This coven is mirrored by Baldur’s relationship with his mother Freya in GOW IV, for after Baldur is freed from his “curse” by the arrowhead of mistletoe on Atreus’ jacket, he wants to kill his mother Freya. Confronted with this impending parricide, Kratos intervenes and kills Baldur, pointing out that Kratos and Atreus, as gods, must now be better—must therefore free themselves from this circle of genealogical killing in which Kratos found himself in GOW I-III and with which he is confronted again in Helheim in GOW IV: “Quoting his father, Kratos claims that the cycle must end and that they all should be better, as he snaps Baldur’s neck a second time, killing him once and for all”: <https://godofwar.fandom.com/wiki/Baldur> [04.06.2022].

102 H. Bojahr: *Spielmechanik*, p. 240.

narrative and interactive levels and complexly staged perspectival coming together of player and game character, what C. Klimmt et al. already observed regarding identification processes in interactive media is to be achieved:

“Due to the direct link between players and characters that video game interactivity facilitates; it is reasonable to assume that very quick and profound alterations of players’ self-perception happen through identification.”¹⁰³

This temporary change of the recipient’s point of view is the basis for empathy with the Spartan reenacted in GoW IV.

In conclusion, it should be noted that identification with heroic figures and their underlying narrative cores and schemes has been possible and intended since antiquity, even before the digital medium. The reduction to human affects is a dominant stylistic feature, that characterizes heroic figures and is able to bring complex historical events, as well as cultural horizons of meaning, into the recipient’s reflection in an exemplary way. An “*advance towards* a heroic figure as well as an absolute distancing from it can thus be achieved. With regard to GoW IV, it is not so much possible to speak of a sudden *humanization* of the hero or even to establish a new conception. “Trauma, as *the other* of heroic narrative”¹⁰⁴ is present from the beginning of the game series. Kratos is and remains the tragic heroic figure that he has been since GoW I; the difference with GoW IV lies primarily in the way GoW IV purposefully leads ludic recipients to play out and experience in it the multidimensionality of the figure through its reenactment, its limited ludic autonomy, and the narrative presentation of the complex heroic schema.

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103 Ibid., p. 358.

104 Assmann, Aleida: *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit. Erinnerungskultur und Gedächtnispolitik*, München: Beck 2006.

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