



GOD OF WAR RAGNARÖK

Next to godliness

To call the 2018 *God of War* a sequel almost does it a disservice. Yes, it was a continuation of Kratos' original multi-game journey, but it placed him and a new family in a foreign world to reflect on his past and try to secure his future. Kratos' journey to connect to his son while battling a new legion of distrustful gods was a revelation in both video game storytelling and action, setting a high bar for the inevitable sequel. *Ragnarök* may lack the unique impact of the prior game, but everything that worked so well the first time comes forward, along with a story that earns the proper definition of the term epic.

Ragnarök basically picks up exactly where the previous left off. In a tradition established early in the *God of War* series, the opening hours are stellar. The action kicks off immediately, setting up new foes and old friends, but among all the explosive set pieces are quiet moments of engrossing performance showcase. Newcomer Odin and returning scorned mother Freya's characterizations are particularly fantastic, but even the weakest performance in *Ragnarök* makes the typical video game performance pale in comparison.

The sequel story lacks the singular, compelling goal of the first game: deliver Faye's ashes to the highest peak of the nine realms. By design, *Ragnarök's* narrative is more ambiguous. Is there such a thing as fate? Do we run to war, or do everything we can to avoid it? Is Odin really *that* bad? How do you deal with a teenager? At times, the long-term goal for the player is not clear, but purposefully, the same can be said for the participating characters. I felt lost sometimes as the main goal went in and out of focus, but the moments when it is fully clear are thrilling and

made me sprint past the numerous side quests just to see what happens next, especially during the closing hours. And even in those instances where the focus is softened, the interpersonal moments are strong and moving. An incredible amount of pathos rests under the surface of every character in the game, and to see them all come to grips with their demons in this oppressive world is consistently affecting.

As key as the story has become to this new era of *God of War*, the combat remains an equally important element. The most negative thing to be said about fighting the various enemies of the nine realms is it isn't radically different or changed from the previous game. You start with more weapons this time around, but the core combos are mostly the same. The library of special attacks you can pull off is larger, but I admit I found my favorites early on and was not particularly compelled to experiment. The types of enemies you fight, on the other hand, has greatly

expanded. Mini bosses are numerous, and when they repeat, a new wrinkle is typically added, or it is a fully optional pursuit.

God of War Ragnarök feels a lot like *God of War* (2018), which is a compliment considering how fantastic that game is. Sony Santa Monica was right to not break what wasn't broken and it has expertly continued the story threads that were left hanging from the previous game. Any complaints about the overall experience (familiar combat, collecting and leveling up equipment isn't particularly interesting) are quickly forgotten in the face of the compelling narrative, believable character relationships, and incredible visuals and animation. Even from its early PlayStation 2 days, the *God of War* series has always set a high quality bar for itself, and with few exceptions, it has always managed to leap above that bar. *God of War Ragnarök* is no different. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

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