

# Composing the Hero: Musical Gender Construction of Fantasy RPG Heroes

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## Abstract

In recent years, the academic study of video game music has increased as players express greater interest in listening to scores outside of play. While much study is dedicated to how music communicates gendered narrative within cinema, these same semiotics are little explored in the musical scores of games. This article examines music's role in characterizing gendered narrative tropes of heroism and action within fantasy RPGs. Drawing on ludomusical theories of game music function, gender film music theory, and narratological structuring of heroes and heroines, this article examines how music informs players of gender identity in video game character construction and play. The musical content for the themes of the hero Kratos from *God of War* (Santa Monica Studio, 2018) and the heroine Aloy from *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017) are analyzed to determine how game creators and composers communicate, intentionally or otherwise, gendered ideals of heroic narrative through instrumentation, tonality, and rhythm. By comparing these musical themes and their gender connotations to the plot, character construction, and player interaction of both Kratos and Aloy reveals how music adheres or subverts traditional narrative tropes of heroes and heroines.

## Keywords

Music; gender; hero; heroine; *God of War*; *Horizon: Zero Dawn*.

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## Introduction

Gender politics of video games has become a large area of study within game studies. The culture in and around video games historically reflects male hegemonic ideals. Outside of the ludic space, gaming's main consumers are stereotypically thought to be males, especially young adolescent males. Research shows that developers tend to skew their advertisements towards young males as a target marketing group, exacerbating the stereotype of video game play as a masculine activity (Chess, 2017). As a consequence, game content tends to fit the ideals, imagined or otherwise, of a male audience. Game characters are disproportionately male and performing roles of hypermasculine violence while female characters are underrepresented and serve stereotypical roles of victims or love interests (Dietz, 1998; Lynch et al., 2016). Though the visual representation of characters has received much attention in the way it reveals sociocultural norms of gender identity, some advocate that narrative and gameplay style further reveal a gendered experience in the act of play. Game-generated operations such as mechanics, narrative structure, and goals may indicate gendered performative actions that either match or subvert a character's visual presentation (Burril, 2008; Kirkland, 2009).

The notion that actions express gender is a widely held theory in sociological studies. The concepts of "masculinity" and "femininity" are considered identities that are "produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence" (Butler, 1990, p. 24). Gender then becomes a kind of "performance" as individuals take actions to be interpreted as either male or female. Given this theory of defining gender through performative actions, the process of gameplay may curate a specific gendered identity for players.

The music heard within video games potentially aids in providing a gendered reading of narrative and performative action within games as it is a highly interactive entity within the game. As the player moves through the game, pre-programmed audio files are attached to specific actions within the game's algorithm which then makes the file audible (Medina-Gray, 2016). The main themes of playable characters are especially important as these are composed to express a character's emotions and narrative journey (Thomas, 2016). Additionally, video games derive much of their musical semiotics from that of film and opera so that a player may easily interpret meaning from the audio cue, thus making game scores prone to "almost clichéd audio-visual intertextuality" (van Elferen, 2016, p. 37). The interactive collusion of narrative, musical, and ludic movements within the game potentially reinforce gendered stereotypes derived from traditional audio-visual narratives through musical components of a character's theme and how/when a player interacts with these during gameplay. Observing moments of musical and ludic interaction can reveal how the game's

score contributes gendered meaning to a character's narrative and gameplay actions.

As a socially mediated product, music renders meaningful texts that impart gender ideals through performance and historical interpretation. Leo Treitler (1993) describes music history as being "guided by gender duality in its description, evaluation and narrative form" (p. 23). Components of musical works are often imbued with gendered meaning through the continued interpretation of certain musical gestures as being reflective of societal ideals of gender (McClary, 1991; Shepherd, 1991). Though these interpretations are mutable over time, audio-visual works such as opera and film gave rise to conventional practices of musically depicting male and female characters. The visual nature of these entities more explicitly reveals gendered musical practices as composers concern themselves with "accurately" depicting a character's emotional state and narrative (Laing, 2007). In this way, habitual forms of musical composition have emerged to effectively communicate certain characters and narrative situations.

Although music's ability to communicate gendered ideals is a large area of study within other forms of audio-visual media, little attention has been given to music's role in expressing gender within video game scores. Michael Austin (2018) explores how game scores use specific instrumental voicing to portray gender in the musical themes of game characters from several fantasy games. While he mentions instances in which the music reflects gendered action, he does not fully explain how a player's interaction with those themes may impact how they experience their playable character and the game's narrative. A closer examination of these musical elements in conjunction with a player's movement as a specific character may reveal a more highly mediated gender experience of gameplay.

## Methodology

To explore the possible gendering of narrative and action, two games featuring similar game mechanics and narrative elements were chosen as case studies. The chosen games, *God of War* (Santa Monica Studio, 2018) and *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (Guerrilla Games, 2017), feature a sole-playable male and female protagonist, respectively. Through aural transcriptions, the musical components of each character's theme are analyzed and compared to historical musical depictions of male and female heroes. The thoughts, processes, and character interpretations of the composers are considered as they are largely concerned with communicating specific character traits within the themes. Interviews and different writings of individual composers reveal how each interpreted and worked with other creative parties to curate a specific musical gendered character.

After full playthroughs of each game, significant moments in which the character's theme is featured during gameplay are analyzed to see how

the intersection of narrative, player interaction, and music might impart gendered ideals of the character. Since music is programmed to trigger during specific points as the player moves through the game, observing the times in which a character's theme appears and the ways players interact with it may provide insight to how creators, consciously or otherwise, structured each character and the player's play experience.

### Gendered Narratives of Heroes and Heroines

Theoretical texts examining the tropes of heroism tend to refer to the hero as the destroyer of evil who serves the best interests of society, inspires others, is a leader, and determines their own fate, among others (Taha, 2002). In his book *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell (1949) describes the hero as one of exceptional gifts whose actions solve larger sociocultural conflicts either locally or upon the world at large. Campbell recognized that the hero embarks on a quest, referred to as the hero's journey, and follows a pattern of specific outward physical actions to resolve moral disorder. The most typical heroic archetype is the Warrior, a courageous and empowered figure traditionally reserved for men (Pearson, 1986). These figures are assertive and physical beings that serve as "[Western] culture's definition of heroism" (Pearson, 1986, p. 74).

In comparison to the hero, the heroine is constructed in opposition to her male counterpart. Feminist film theorist Mary Ann Doane (1987) states that the female protagonist within films is constricted to the domestic sphere, a stereotype created on the basis of her biological function. Women are portrayed as mother figures and are confined to domestic roles. Narratives often place great emphasis on her ability and desire to create a family. Female figures often serve as pinnacles of social morality as they are equated with purity and submissiveness (Kaplan, 1983). Both socially and physically confined to this singular space, the heroine's story depicts a struggle between the polarity of convention and self. If female characters try to act outside of the social parameters set upon them, they often turn inward to face their true opposition: themselves. Female heroism becomes an internal struggle of personal identity as the narrative continuously "reminds [the character] that her problem is that she *is* a woman" and how "she can't escape [this] fact" (Basinger, 1993, p. 19, emphasis in the original). Her gender defines her experience in such a way that she can never overcome it.

While this definition of the heroine is ubiquitous across most narrative genres, it does not always feel correct in light of more modern representations of female characters. Recent narratives situate women in roles traditionally held by male figures, such as the action hero. Creating a female heroine as a male hero, although seemingly a desirable quality as it potentially transcends the limitations of gender, is highly problematic. Catherine Constable (2005) observes that many of the films in which women are considered the "hero," they only do so

when adhering to actions of the male hero. Simply putting a female figure in the place of a male character does not equate to better representation. Commenting on other feminist writers, Sue Thornham (2012) observes that “narrative itself . . . its dominant—its *heroic*—forms, is masculine, its function to produce the subject as male” (p. 12, emphasis in the original). Narrative structures are so imbued with gendered meaning that they construe a male subject regardless of visual presentation. Partaking in traditional male actions can be seen as a type of cross-dressing or masquerade as the actions and the body that performs them are viewed as separate from one another (Schubart, 2007). Ultimately, it is the symbols of action and the formulation of narrative that reaffirm the dichotomized male subject and female object.

### The Hero: Kratos

Introduced in 2005 for the PlayStation 2, *God of War* (herein referred to as *GoW*) has become a classic fixture within the Sony PlayStation canon. Set in Ancient Greece, *GoW I-III* (Santa Monica Studio, 2005, 2007, 2010) introduces the character Kratos, a Spartan soldier who exacts revenge upon the Greek pantheon for being tricked into killing his wife and daughter. Relentless anger fuels the overarching plot and actions taken by the player (as Kratos). The digital manifestation of Kratos and style of gameplay reflect a “militarized masculinity,” or gameplay that enforces gendered coded scenarios of combat (Kline et al., 2003, p. 194). The first three *GoW* games incite a hypermasculine character as Kratos engages in socially coded masculine actions through physical rage by killing the god of war Ares (*GoW*), destroying Olympus (*GoW II*), and serving ultimate justice by killing Zeus (*GoW III*).

The latest game released in 2018 departs from previous games within the franchise. Taking place many years after the events of *GoW III*, players find Kratos a markedly different character. He remarried, has a son, Atreus, and lives a quiet life in the woods of the Nordic realm, Midgard. Unlike previous games in the canon, Kratos’ driving motivation of the game is to fulfill the dying wish of his deceased wife, Laufey, who requested Kratos and Atreus spread her ashes off the tallest mountain in all the realms. The overarching plot is comparatively more centered on the internal struggles of Kratos and his relationship with his son.

The emphasis on the sense of self and parental connection to their child is reminiscent of plots from the woman’s film genre. The original need for justice and retribution having been fulfilled, Kratos struggles with maintaining his new identity. The choices that Kratos makes are integral to his selfhood and create real consequences regarding his relationship with his son. These are central plot points of female heroines in which women are forced to make decisions that define their identity as a part of the female journey (Bassinger, 1993). Historically, genres such as melodramas and soap operas target female audiences by offering storylines featuring highly emotional content usually centering on a

woman's relationship between male lovers and/or their children (Haskell, 1999). In this way, Kratos' character may be considered somewhat effeminized. Catherine Clément (1988) argues a similar point regarding male figures of opera who adopt narrative attitudes of the opera heroine. She claims that male characters exhibiting madness or emotional frenzy "partake in femininity" as their plot reflects those of their female counterparts and, ultimately, "they are doomed to their [same] undoing" (Clément, 1988, p. 118). Though visually Kratos still carries traits of hypermasculinity, and his actions and those of the player are mainly combat based, the underlying plot and motivation for character development are highly reminiscent of tropes deemed as experiences of the heroine in traditional narratives.

### **Kratos' Theme**

To accompany this new story and characterization of Kratos, game creators replaced previous composer, Gerard Marino, with composer Bear McCreary to create a new musical language that better reflects the game. Recognizing the need for a newly realized score, McCreary includes many instruments that are part of the Nordic musical tradition such as the nyckelharpa, hardanger fiddle, and Icelandic choir singing verses in the Icelandic language. The new musical vision for the game includes a rewrite of Kratos' theme. McCreary began composing for the game in 2015 after discussing narrative, characters, and the overall direction that game director, Cory Barlog, envisioned for the newest installment of *GoW*. The theme went through several stages of development over the span of four years, but the initial composition was abandoned for Kratos' character. Reflecting on his process, McCreary wrote that the first theme was "too sad and lyrical to present Kratos" and instead wrote one that would reflect Kratos as "masculine, relentless, and badass" (2018a, para. 4).

Though never explicitly described as feminine, McCreary (20108a) expresses anxiety over the original draft's ability to impart a masculine image. He continuously uses gendered rhetoric in analyzing and disqualifying the usefulness of the original theme sketch to Kratos' character. In a later blog post, he described the theme as a "melancholy lullaby in a lilting waltz" that is "disarmingly gorgeous" (McCreary, 2018b, para. 9). The original sketch of the theme includes only the nyckelharpa and a small string ensemble as opposed to the traditional epic orchestration that many fantasy games use. String timbres are often associated with femininity as they are considered to relate to feminine traits such as fragility and gentleness (Iitti, 2006). In addition, dance music genres are often equivocated with femininity as they emphasize romance and emotion (Christenson & Peterson, 1988). Initially writing this theme in response to the game's narrative, the emotional quality of the story may have inspired McCreary to create a theme that communicates a feminine subjectivity.

The gendered interpretation of this theme is actualized within the game itself and further aligns the theme's association with femininity and emotional drama. Although the theme was ultimately scrapped for Kratos, McCreary goes on to use the theme for Kratos' deceased wife, a character never seen. Yet, her musical material appears quite often throughout the score. Entitled "Memories of Mother," the original theme written for Kratos recurs during points at which Kratos is emotionally distressed, primarily during cut scenes in which Kratos is talking with Atreus. Since Kratos visually remains emotionally stoic, Mother's theme appears as a musically anthropomorphized character that indicates Kratos' emotional state.

It is clear from the writings of McCreary (2018a) that the player's ability to associate gendered ideals with musical themes claimed importance in the creative production of the score, even if only when addressing Kratos' theme specifically. McCreary's second draft of the theme, or "God of War," as it is titled on the soundtrack, was created to communicate his masculine aggression and characterization from previous games. A transcription is provided in Figure 1.

The image shows a musical score for the Kratos theme from *God of War* (2018). The score is in 4/4 time with a tempo of quarter note = 72. It features four staves in the first system: Horn in F, Trombone 1, 2, Bass, Baritone/Bass, and Concert Bass Drum. The second system, starting at measure 7, includes parts for French Horn, Trombone, Baritone, and Concert Bass Drum. The music is in a key with two flats (B-flat major or D-flat minor) and features a melodic theme in the brass and low strings, with a bass drum consistently accented on the first beat of each measure.

Figure 1. Reduced orchestral transcription of Kratos' theme from *God of War* (2018) as heard on the official soundtrack.

The melodic theme is played by brass and doubled by low strings. Besides these, a bass drum consistently accents the first beat of each measure, often considered the "strong beat" of the measure, while low

male voices sing the ascending minor scale of C-D-Eb in an incredibly low vocal range. These three notes act as a musical motive, a small unit of thematic material which appears ubiquitously through much of the game score. Generally, it is orchestrated in horns, low strings, and/or male vocals.

McCreary (2018b) is explicit when describing the intentionally gendered theme by describing how "Kratos' masculinity and strength are represented by assertive brass, pounding percussion and deep male vocals" (2018b, para. 15). The inclusion of these instruments imparts a masculine and militaristic characterization. Female participation was largely discouraged from the playing of horns, drums, and other percussion instruments within Western practice as the movements involved with playing were deemed to be inappropriate for the "gentle" female demeanor (Steblin, 1995, p. 130). In addition, drums, as well as trumpets, are historically associated with militaristic action as they were used to herald the arrival of an army, signal orders, and build troop morale (Johnson, 2008a). The inclusion of male vocals serves as an explicit male association, ascending from an incredibly low vocal range often associated with masculine power (Johnson, 2008b). Overall, the orchestral construction of the theme intentionally construes a musical image of aggression and masculinity through the careful selection of instrumentation and timbre.

Though the player never hears the theme in full as recorded on the official game soundtrack, parts of the theme appear often through different contexts of gameplay. The gendered association of the theme and how the player interacts with it perpetuates the player's understanding of these musical ideals with masculine action. An example of this is during the cut scene in which Kratos and Atreus hunt a deer in the beginning of the game. After shooting the deer with a bow, Atreus and Kratos chase after the kill only to find the deer is still alive. The moment Atreus realizes this, a portion of Kratos' theme appears in a cello voice and expands to a small string chorus as Atreus expresses hesitation in completing the kill. Kratos aids Atreus in completing the kill by helping him to plunge his knife into the deer. At this moment, the strings culminate to a unison sustained A note while a lone horn takes over the melody as shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Transcription of Kratos' theme as heard during the deer scene as Kratos and Atreus plunge the knife into the deer's side.



A number of associations converge through various visual and auditory elements. The choice in music is crucial as this is the first time the player encounters the theme in conjunction with performed action. French film theorist Michel Chion (2016) refers to this phenomenon as "synchresis," in which a spontaneous and psychophysical connection is created between sonic and visual elements performed simultaneously that leads to a "tight relationship of interdependence between images and sounds" (p. 155). He claims audiences derive specific meanings through the simultaneity of action and sound, that both the sound and accompanying visual element provide meaning to one another for the viewer. In this instance, violence and death become visually linked to this audio cue, effectively teaching the player how to interpret this theme and sets a precedent for future interactions within the game.

While Kratos' theme is often heard during cinematic scenes in which the player participates in a passive role, it largely appears during gameplay when the player is kinetically involved. As the player directs Kratos through the game world and encounters foes, modules of Kratos' theme often appear as players engage in combat. Upon openly attacking or alerting enemies to their presence, the game's system triggers a musical cue to reflect the player's changed state from safety to danger. The theme and the action performed by the player become what Karen Collins (2013) describes as "kinesonically synchretic." Developing from Michel Chion's (2016) theory of synchresis, she observes that some sounds and/or music cues are fused to actions rather than a visual image alone, thus allowing for players to create associations with music and actions they perform during gameplay (Collins, 2013). The interactive quality of Kratos' theme imbues the player's actions with specific musical meaning that allows them to more closely identify the musical cue as part of their embodied experience.

Visual and sonic elements create both a spatial and a subjective experience. Michel Chion (1994) describes the visual elements of cinema as creating a physical location for an object's point of view while sound more discursively delineates the subjective, what he refers to as the "point of audition." Robyn Stillwell (2001) elaborates saying that the collusion of these two entities places the audience within the same physical and subjective (or emotional) position and therefore creates a greater connection between visual object and sound subject. The visual, aural, and kinesthetic points of distance collapse by bringing Kratos' image, his musical theme, and player action into a singular perspective when players freely move through the game and experience Kratos' theme during combat they initiate. Embodying themes in this way allows players to "hear them as if they created them" and that "these sounds (and thus the character) can become an extension of the self" (Collins, 2013, p. 57). Presenting Kratos' theme as a direct reaction to players' physical choices allows players to identify Kratos' theme as their own more closely. In this way, the masculine sonic elements of Kratos may

become a part of the player's personal identity through their continued physical enactment of his theme. The game system allows (forces?) players to internalize their heroic actions as masculine through the continued use of Kratos' theme as they battle their way through the virtual world.

Though the game's narrative depicts a multifaceted character with diverse emotionality, Kratos' theme confines his musical presence to presentations of aggression and anger. The musical components of his theme conform to historical associations of musical masculinity and are intentionally placed in conjunction with actions that reflect sociocultural notions of Western heroism. Kratos' theme does little to reflect his new emotional range and perpetuates the stereotypical hypermasculine image of male video game heroes.

### The Heroine: Aloy

In early 2017, the open-world science fiction game *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (herein referred to as *HZD*) was released exclusively for the PlayStation 4. The game takes place nearly one thousand years following events that set about the end of most organic life on the Earth. Humanity is scattered, divided into hunter-gatherer tribes, and technology is far more primitive. Surviving means learning to hunt not only wildlife, but the animal-like machines that mysteriously exist within the world and attack humans. Players are introduced to the heroine Aloy, a warrior who ventures into this dangerous world so that she may learn the secrets of the machine beasts, and, in doing so, learn about her mysterious and forgotten past.

Since its release, Aloy has been ranked as one of the best female video game characters in terms of representation: her boundless curiosity, physical fortitude, and empathy for others are celebrated as characteristics that make her a more relatable character (Williams, 2020). In addition, creators intentionally did not overtly sexualize her as they wanted to "make a character that told a story in a way that was organic" (Griffin, 2017, para. 14). They put greater emphasis on constructing Aloy as an interesting *person* rather than an interesting *female* character. Aloy's gender never becomes a central part of her plot or characterization as many narratives with female protagonists tend to do.

Aloy's plot and heroic journey contains elements of both hero and heroine narrative tropes. Much of Aloy's motivation is centered on her need to quell an internal dilemma. Having been found as an infant without biological parents, Aloy is decreed an outcast as the unnaturalness of her birth is thought to bring catastrophe. Constantly subjected to ridicule from other tribe members, Aloy struggles internally with her identity and eventually ventures beyond her tribe's lands in search of her mother so that she may understand her place in the world. The struggle with identity and self is one often aligned with female

protagonists. However, much of the events in Aloy's story reflects that of Frederick Turner's (2012) epic hero: she is a person of miraculous birth, lives an obscure and humble life apart from the rest of society, ventures past the edge of the known world, is a magnanimous figure, and inevitably becomes a leader to all (pp. 69–94). While identity struggle and emotional turmoil serve as Aloy's primary motivations within the narrative, the only way for her to learn about herself is through performing grand feats of bravery and violence. The player confronts both of these gendered tropes within Aloy's theme, though these gendered interactions during gameplay possibly alter the way players interpret these musical forces as part of a gendered narrative.

### Aloy's Theme

Aloy's theme was the first piece of music written, although it was not originally intended for Aloy's character specifically. Guerrilla Games unveiled their first trailer for *HZD* at the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), an annual trade event in which video game developers advertise their newest creations, in 2015. Creators asked composer Joris de Man to write music that would fit the story and a small gameplay demo within the trailer. The music composed was thought to only be used for this singular trailer with the intention to write something more permanent later, but after positive feedback, creators kept it as Aloy's main theme (MCV staff, 2017). De Man seemed to have inadvertently created a composition that not only reflected the narrative and ludic experience of the game, but reflected the "gentle strength and sensitivity [he] wanted to portray in [her] theme" (MCV staff, 2017, para. 32).

The theme, like much of the entire game score, is a mixture of electronic and distorted sounds in addition to more traditional instrumentation. Due to music scores being unavailable and the use of various electronic manipulations of instruments that are difficult to dictate into traditional notation, a transcription for piano with solo cello is provided for melodic reference in Figure 3. As a science fiction game in which humanity is completely reconstructed, composers sought to avoid large orchestral scores and instead create foreign sounds from traditional instruments such as guitars and harmonicas by playing them in unconventional ways and sending those recordings through different affect filters (Fling, 2017). The result is a mixture of vaguely recognizable sounds that are electronically filtered and looped in the background. A low, raspy sound created by striking a contrabass bow across a low piano string is looped in the background prior to the appearance of the melody. The unconventional contrabass flute appears sporadically along with sparse drums and various synthesized sounds providing both a "tribal" and futuristic sound to the score.

The image shows a musical score for Violoncello and Piano. The tempo is marked as 116. The score is divided into three systems. The first system (measures 1-5) shows the Violoncello (Vc.) and Piano (Pno.) parts. The second system (measures 6-10) continues the Violoncello and Piano parts. The third system (measures 11-15) shows the Violoncello and Piano parts, with a double bar line at the end of measure 11.

Figure 3. Transcription of Aloy's theme as heard on the official soundtrack of *Horizon: Zero Dawn* (2017). This example is a piano reduction with solo cello meant to reflect the melodic progression of both acoustic and electronic sounds within the theme.

Out of this inorganic sounding score emerges the cello line, establishing a key and tempo from the seeming electronic chaos. The melody is primarily centered upon the opening four-note motive, characterized by an ascending major fifth. Hero figures within cinema are often musically depicted with large dramatic leaps, mostly fourths, fifths, and octaves, to underscore their heroic actions or intents (Scheurer, 2008). These ascending patterns outline major triadic tonalities to signify a sense of triumph. While the melody represents traditional musical heroism, with large intervallic leaps, the sense of triumph that is expressed through major intervals is subverted by being tonally centered in the A minor scale. The minor seventh leap from mm. 7–8 creates a sense of incompleteness by not, quite reaching the full octave and prolonging the sense of resolution through a slow step-wise descent across three measures. This gives a sense of striving, not quite reaching the final destination, and falling downwards. The melodic line seems to classify

Aloy not as a triumphant hero, but rather a tragic hero, someone who suffers or causes suffering in their attempt at heroic action.

Overall, Aloy's theme situates her as an emotional figure rather than a purely heroic one. The choice of instrument situates Aloy as an emotive and rather feminine character. Film narratives frame women as highly emotive beings, especially in women's films which center on a woman's need to resolve some emotional turmoil. The primary instrument of the melodic line, the cello, insinuates a feminine and dramatic emotional experience. As previously explored, string timbres historically allude to feminine ideals of fragility and weakness. In her work on film music, Claudia Gorbman (1987) details how cinema of the early and mid-twentieth century utilized string orchestras to "cue you in correctly to the presence of Woman on screen" and argues that the excessively emotional portrayal of female characters "must find its outlet in the euphony of a string orchestra" (p. 80). The use of the cello in conjunction with the longer rhythms and minor tonality gives the melody a tragic quality that suggests a suffering feminine character.

The melodic content epitomizes the traditional cinematic portrayal of women as emotional by choosing to use a cello as the initial voice that introduces Aloy and her theme. The feminization of Aloy's theme is further enhanced when the melody repeats and is presented in the female voice. The melodic content sits rather high in the cello's range. Following iterations of the melody transition from the cello to a mezzo-soprano voice in the same octave vocalizing on the syllable "ah," thus more explicitly aligning Aloy's melody with feminine meaning. Within opera, lower female voices connote mature, evil, promiscuous, or suffering figures (Clément, 2000). Certainly, Aloy's story is one fueled by emotional suffering. Her story is primarily centered on her loneliness and attempt at finding her place in the world. The use of the female voice reinforces the gender identity of Aloy and her theme, but the choice of vocal range situates her as an emotionally suffering figure, thus further aligning femininity with emotionality.

Aloy's melody, though it contains elements of a hero's theme, confuses the musical heroic ideals by emphasizing her internal emotional struggle through instrumentation and tonalities emblematic of femininity and strong emotions. Though the full track eventually includes drums and some brass instrumentation, instruments that are typically coded as heroic and masculine, they are sparse and often build the emotional height of the melody. Within the game itself, Aloy's theme can be heard in full within the main menu. Aside from starting a new campaign, the main menu is the first part of the game the player encounters. Winnifred Phillips (2014) describes the music heard here as essentially the main theme of the entire game: it advertises the overall experience and players refer back to it when remembering their time within the game. The choice of setting Aloy's theme here reveals how creators hold this musical content in great regard because it introduces their meticulously

curated gaming experience. The theme's presence advertises an emotional heroic story, although it arguably sets the expectation of a feminized story due to instrumentation and tonality. However, depending on how long a player decides to stay within the main menu, they are likely to miss much of the theme. Though the placement of the theme here indicates the theme's ludonarrative importance, it remains in a largely passive area that players are likely to move through quickly.

Phillips (2014) also finds that this theme does not reoccur in its same state within the rest of the game. She explains that while parts of the theme may appear within the remaining game soundtrack, such as the use of motives, the main menu is likely the only place in which the main theme is heard in full. This largely remains true for *HZD*. Full iterations of the theme are rare, though the defining four note motive is used across several different tracks within the game. The moments in which the theme is fully presented are during non-diegetic sequences, such as the main menu and loading screens. Each of these occurrences are during moments where the player is engaged in non-diegetic gameplay and remains kinetically passive. In addition, depending on the player's need to handle administrative functions of the game or their processing speed, they are likely to move quickly through these spaces without hearing the entirety of the theme.

Even during diegetic moments of play, Aloy's theme and motivic material appears during times where players themselves are relatively passive. This happens primarily during cinematic scenes in which Aloy encounters pivotal emotional points of her story arc. It is interesting to note that in each of these tracks, the female vocalist, Julie Elven, is present. Joris de Man commented saying that, for cut scenes, "if the scenes signaled an emotional turn for Aloy, [Julie Elven's] voice and permutations of Aloy's theme . . . seemed like a good choice" (MCV Staff, 2017, para. 20). Composers consciously relegated Aloy's theme to moments where Aloy experiences high points of emotion within her journey. In these instances, the player is not kinetically engaged with the musical material or action on the screen, but rather watching Aloy's reaction in cinematic cut scenes. There are a few exceptions to the player's passive diegetic interaction with Aloy's thematic material. While traveling out in the world, different global tracks will trigger as the player freely roams. Each track appears while the player is kinetically engaged in play. However, the activity that the player experiences is still objectively passive in nature. These tracks appear seemingly at random while the player travels within the world. At these times, they are in relative safety and usually freely exploring and engaging with the natural world around them. Unlike Kratos' thematic presentation, direct kinesthetic choices from the player do not trigger these fragments of Aloy's theme. The presentations of the musical cues are random and subordinate to other cues triggering in relation to a player's movements.

For example, as the player approaches an enemy, a battle music module is triggered and will cause the global track to fade out immediately.

The most significant presentation of Aloy's theme, almost completely in its original form, occurs during one of the most revealing points of the narrative. Aloy and the player are exploring a dilapidated building that once served as the scientific nexus for those who created GAIA, the terra-forming system that the Old Ones used to preserve organic life after the apocalypse. During their search, the player and Aloy find a holographic recording that details the death of Dr. Elisabet Sobeck, the scientist responsible for creating GAIA and restoring life to the Earth. The recording details how a port seal to GAIA's epicenter malfunctioned, thus making the facility perceptible to rogue war machines that are programmed to destroy GAIA. The only way for the port to be repaired is from the outside. In order to save GAIA, and thus humanity, Dr. Sobeck elects to brave the outside world and repair the seal herself. This act of self-sacrifice all but ensures her death.

As Aloy and the player watch the recording, Aloy's theme, as heard in the main menu, underscores this scene. At first glance, the theme's presentation seems to be kinesiologically syncretic as the player must physically press the button that activates the holographic recording. However, the audio's presentation is more accurately described as interactive nondynamic audio. Nondynamic musical cues are what Karen Collins (2008) describes as linear presentations of music that are unaffected by player input. While the sound is triggered through the player's kinetic choice, its presentation remains static and cannot be altered by the player's actions. Although the player is in full kinetic control of Aloy, the music and scene function more akin to an interactive cut scene that the game forces upon the player. The scene itself highlights the heroic nature of the theme as it is sonically syncretic with a visual representation of heroic self-sacrifice. The theme is recontextualized to symbolize traditional heroic action as opposed to emotionality alone.

Aloy conforms to narrative tropes of both Western heroes and heroines. She partakes in traditional heroic action through physical violence and exploration, yet her narrative centers on internal struggles emblematic of heroines. Despite this, the usage of her theme perpetuates Western notions of femininity reflecting high emotionality and passivity. Though elements of musical heroism are present, musical semiotics demonstrative of tragic heroines subvert a purely heroic reading. In addition, her theme never becomes part of her performative actions and instead highlights her internal emotional state. Unlike Kratos' theme, players never kinetically engage in a way that allows them to actively embody her theme. Instead, they primarily experience her theme in passive spaces within and outside the diegesis.

## Conclusion

While the story and character arcs of both Kratos and Aloy are largely centered upon traditional feminine narrative tropes of interiority and identity crisis, their musical themes do not equally portray these ideals. Bear McCreary (2018a) actively avoids portraying Kratos as musically feminine by scrapping the original sketch of his theme and applying it to the musical Mother character. The more “feminine” theme appears only during moments when a player is kinetically passive and visually witnesses high points of emotionality within the game narrative. McCreary’s decision to anthropomorphize Kratos’ emotive state as a feminine sonic character can be interpreted as the creator’s attempt to separate Kratos’ masculine demeanor and his emotional turmoil. Kratos’ official theme explicitly portrays masculine ideals through traditional musical semiotics of masculinity. The player actively participates with this theme largely in a kinesonic capacity during moments of violence and combat.

In contrast, Aloy’s theme seems to situate her as a tragic heroine. Though her musical content expresses heroic ideals through large intervallic leaps often found in heroic themes in cinema, these are obscured by the feminine instrumental voicing and minor tonality. Despite claiming to construct Aloy as an interesting character regardless of gender, specific placement of Aloy’s theme seems to perpetuate gendered tropes of female characters. Creators make the conscious choice to include permutations of Aloy’s theme during cinematic moments in which she experiences an emotional turn in her narrative. The player primarily interacts with her theme in a kinesonically passive way and often during parts of play that are outside of diegesis. Overall, the player’s experience of Aloy’s theme relegates her heroic narrative to points where she must quell her internal struggle as opposed to being equally represented during performative heroic actions.

Both games allow players to interact with their character’s theme in a way that perpetuates social stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. Kratos’ masculine theme appears at moments in which the player is a highly active participant within the sonic, visual, and mechanical structure of the game, whereas players only encounter Aloy’s more feminine theme in passive contexts of gameplay. The discrepancies between the presentations of each character’s theme highlights unequal forms of ludic interaction. Kratos’ theme appears in a larger variety of forms and contexts that are not afforded to Aloy’s theme. Aloy’s theme never becomes a part of her performative actions as Kratos’ does. The intentional inclusion and exclusion of each character’s theme during certain performative actions in the game provide insight into how creators construct the character’s musical presence. In both games, composers worked closely with creators to ensure their musical material “accurately” depicts the characters and their stories. Highlighting the composer’s compositional process reveals how game developers



consider music an integral part of the ludic experience and that composers make deliberate choices to musically construct a specific character and game experience. The choices provide real consequences to a player's interpretation and understanding of their playable character. Aloy's theme only presents itself during moments of high emotion in which the player serves a more passive role, whereas Kratos' theme appears in emotional, passive, and kinetic instances, though these typically accompany images and actions of violence. The player's ability to kinesonically interact with Kratos' theme gives them a greater chance to internalize the theme by sonically embodying it through combat. A player's more passive interaction with Aloy's theme lessens their chance to experience the theme in a similar way. Each theme's treatment aligns with normative Western ideals of masculine and feminine action.

Of course, these interpretations are not without their fallacies. It feels necessary to recognize that the scenes and points of gameplay chosen may not necessarily encompass all iterations and situations in which a character's theme is presented and interacted with. In addition, the gendered readings of each character's narrative and theme are potentially subjective to my own. There is no guarantee that other players experience or interpret the ludomusical functions of these games in a similar way. As a form of interactive media, video games invite players into ludic realms in which participation is mandatory. Though the governing forces of gameplay and design may indicate values of a dominant culture, players imbue their own subjectivities and experiences into their actions within the game, thus allowing for discursive forms of play and understanding in a single game (Jennings, 2018; Shaw, 2017).

These case studies themselves cannot and should not be thought to represent all other games with an exclusively male or female protagonist. Many game genres require different forms of player and musical interaction thus resulting in differing musical idioms for those genres (Phillips, 2014; Summers, 2016). The two games presented here share a similar game genre and mechanics, thus sharing a similar musical language and function. Games in other genres require music to function in different ways that may not be congruent with those of *GoW* or *HZD*. Instead, these case studies should serve as the opening to a broader conversation about how musical interaction may alter the gendered experience of gameplay at large. As music is intricately connected to the underlying mechanics of a game's structure, continued research is needed regarding how the collusion of visual, aural, and kinetic interaction might produce complacent or resistive forms of mediated gender performance.

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