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# MODERN TRENDS IN GOD OF WAR

# ABSTRACT

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This bachelor's thesis examines whether open world and RPG elements are trending in action-adventure games, and how they affect God of War (2018). These features have been notable in the discussion surrounding single-player games, and their possibly increasing use in games has been a popular topic. God of War is a successful sequel that has adapted to the current game industry by including these features. This paper examines multiple action-adventures over a span of 20 years to find out if the features are trending. The case game is methodically analyzed so that the features can be examined deeply. The results show that open worlds and RPG elements have become more common, and they can be implemented creatively and in various ways, as in God of War.

Keywords: video games, action-adventure games, trends

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

As in any other creative medium, video games influence each other. When specific features appear in many different influential games during a certain time period, they can be called trends. Modern trends are important because they show what kind of changes have happened, are happening and may happen in games as a whole. Their recognition is also important in the context of the discussion on innovation and new ideas in the games industry. Using trends as a basis can help industry professionals as well as consumers understand, in the context of specific time periods, which game features are popular and which ideas are truly new.

Innovation, the formation and changing of genres as well as the implementation of new ideas has been studied by Arsenault (2009) among others. However, research on trends of specific time periods has been very scarce, and game trends from the perspective of included features during recent years have not been discussed in game studies. The trending status of specific game elements currently has little academic background. This means that increasingly popular and important elements are not completely understood.

This bachelor's thesis investigates if open world and RPG elements have become more common in single-player video games. The paper uses single-player action-adventure non-independent games released during the years 1998, 2008 and 2018 to examine the prevalence of the features in games of the genre. To examine the trending game features more closely, I have chosen God of War for case study.

Non-independent games are examined due to the creative climate being quite different in games with larger budgets compared to indie titles. While indie titles have more freedom to experiment with new ideas in inventive ways, games with larger budgets are at times creatively limited by popular trends of the game industry. To minimize financial risk, developers and publishers opt for games that contain features that are popular and therefore safe. This makes games with medium to large teams and budgets behind them more relevant for a study researching trends.

For the other criteria, single-player games are focused on because their trends have not been discussed to the extent that multiplayer trends have, and therefore this perspective is important. These are games that contain a single-player campaign, and they may or may not contain multiplayer components. The action-adventure genre is very broad, and many hybrids of roleplaying games and shooters fit inside it. This is an environment that

shows that quite different games can have common features. The years 1998, 2008 and 2018 are chosen to show if certain elements have become more common over time. God of War was released in 2018, and 10-year intervals are large enough to show possible changes in the use of game features. The Metacritic score limit is used to focus on potentially important games. There is a correlation between high metascores and high sales, which are both concrete gauges of success (Greenwood-Ericksen et al., 2013). Neither of these automatically indicate cultural importance, however, and metascore has been chosen only as a suggestion of importance.

The choice to study a singular game was made to increase the depth of gameplay analysis. By examining how one game executes popular game features, more insight on them is gained. Also, while the contexts of the features differ between various games, the features themselves are unambiguous and can be generalised to a certain extent. God of War was chosen due to its importance as well as its features which can be found in many other games. The game is highly influential: with a Metacritic score of 94 (Metacritic, 2020) and sales over 10 million (Ryan, 2019), it is an important example of modern action-adventure games that may yet inspire future titles. Open world and RPG mechanics are examined as parts of God of War.

The results indicate that open world and RPG elements have become more popular during the span of 20 years. However, these features can appear in ways that are ambiguous, and some games, such as God of War, use them inconspicuously. While definitions of the features and the action-adventure genre impact research, the results show a distinct change that cannot be ignored.

The paper is structured as follows. In chapter 2 of the thesis I clarify central terms related to the research and give background on trends and their closely related concepts: innovation and genres. Chapter 3 introduces the research question and methods. Chapter 4 contains the results examining whether the studied game features can be called trends. The chapter continues to examine these features in God of War by analysing how they are implemented in the game and how they affect the player experience. Final conclusions, problems and possibilities for new research are presented in chapter 5.

## 2 TERMINOLOGY AND BACKGROUND

### 2.1 Terminology

#### 2.1.1 Action-adventure

The action-adventure genre is a category that has unclear definitions which have not been universally agreed upon. Adams (2014) describes action-adventure games:

The action-adventure is a hybrid genre, combining features from both action games and adventure games. To play them well requires a fair amount of physical skill, but they also offer a story line, numerous characters, an inventory system, dialogue, and other features of adventure games.

This paper defines games of the genre as ones that include sections that demand reflexes and mechanical skill from their players. The games tell a story that takes the player and the player character on an adventure, and the mechanics and dynamics of the game support this journey. There must be elements of exploration, which means multiple locations which may include collectable objects, puzzles or characters that are friendly or hostile. The main features of the games must be centred on the aforementioned action and adventure elements. This paper includes games that have elements from multiple genres, as hybrid games are very common. Features such as puzzles, dialogue choices, character attributes and usable guns may be included, but none of them must be the main focus. Stealth and horror games can be considered subgenres of the action-adventure genre, as stealth gameplay or horror as a thematic element do not usually exclude action or adventure from the games.

The genre is very inclusive, and therefore accurate definitions are problematic. A game with gunplay can be considered both a shooter and an action-adventure game. An easier way to approach the definition is from the angle of excluded games.

There are many games that this paper does not count as action-adventures due to their heavy reliance on RPG mechanics, which make them primarily role-playing games. Action RPG is a genre that is very close to action-adventures, and it includes the Souls (2009-), The Witcher (2007-) and The Division (2016-) series as well as Final Fantasy XV (2016), NieR: Automata (2017), Horizon Zero Dawn (2017) and Borderlands 3 (2019). In all these titles, game progression is mostly dependent on character strength which comes from levels, attributes and equipment. Completion of the games without

acquiring new items and levelling up is very difficult if not impossible, and this self-limiting playstyle may only be seen in challenge runs of these games. This is what sets action RPGs apart from the action-adventures. Action-adventures allow the player to progress without limiting them with abstract and numerical power levels.

The games that are chosen for presentation as data in this paper include cases whose genre is only arguably action-adventure. These are examined more closely in chapter 4.1.

### **2.1.2 Non-independent game**

Independent games are excluded from this paper's examination of titles. Indies often do not have a publisher and their developer teams are small, sometimes consisting of one person only. In addition to this, indies have innovative qualities that are not found in mainstream games. To help the definition, many indie developers use the term when speaking of themselves and their games. In an article on Gamasutra, Gril (2008) defines indie games:

An independent game is above all trying to innovate and provide a new experience for the player. It is not just filling a publisher's portfolio need. It has not been invented at a marketing department. And it has not been designed by a committee.

Independent games are culturally very important. However, the focus of this paper are trends in larger mainstream games. Interest is on the implementation of existing ideas and if trends can be found in medium to large games that have greater financial backing.

### **2.1.3 Trend**

This paper's use of the term trend refers to game features that are popular in the sense that they appear in multiple games released during a specific time frame. This usage is quite rare in game studies, and it is more often seen in games journalism and discussion between consumers. This is why the term needs to be examined further.

Merriam-Webster's one definition of the noun is the following: "the general movement over time of a statistically detectable change" (Merriam-Webster). The Cambridge Dictionary has two relevant definitions: "the general direction of changes or developments" and "a general development in a situation or in the way that people behave" (Cambridge Dictionary). While dictionaries have multiple meanings for the word



trend, the ones I chose here are most relevant to this paper. Other uses include fashion trends and literal lines of general direction.

This paper uses the word trend while referring to game features themselves, not game industry changes in a broader sense. Conventions and common design practices, while closely related to game features, are not the focus of this study.

The term's relation to time is also noteworthy. Talking about popular game features would be too extensive, as there have historically been many of them. The aim of this paper is to focus on recent trends, and game features that are currently irrelevant are not examined.

## **2.2 Background**

Innovation happens when new ideas are born in game design. These ideas, if successful and worthwhile, are later used by other games. If a specific idea is implemented by many different games during a certain time frame, it can be considered a trend. To give context to trends, this section examines the meaning of original ideas, their implementation as well as genres.

The birth of genres is an example of the importance of trends, and the two terms are strongly related. When a major new idea has been well-received, multiple games have then identified themselves as belonging to the same category, genre. While most genres have come into existence centuries ago, there are outliers in the form of subgenres. Battle royale games such as PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds (2016) and Fortnite (2017) have been highly successful, and the game style that started as a user modification in Arma 2 (2009) and Minecraft (2009) has become such an influential trend that even recent iterations of the blockbuster Call of Duty (2003–) series have included battle royale as a game mode. Despite this example, it is very rare to see games that are genre breaking or genre creating (Tschang, 2003, p. 4).

Genres serve as one possible way to approach trends. Gussin (1995) researched the adventure game genre and found multiple trends that appeared in adventure games. Interactive movies, multiplayer games and interactive fiction were the three main trends that were found. (Gussin, 1995.) While the study is old, one thing has not changed in the

games industry: the advancement of technology greatly affects games and creates a foundation for new trends.

Even games that are generally considered innovative use elements from other games or the real world as inspiration (Tschang, 2003, p. 14). Interviewed game designers thought of ideas themselves as cheap and plentiful, while they thought that their implementation is what is truly important (Tschang, 2003, p. 18). It may be hard to find truly original ideas in game design, and the concept of originality is problematic. The implementation of existing ideas in the game industry is very common, and should be considered self-evident.

The usage of old game features to create a successful game has been done by games such as Halo: Combat Evolved (2001). Järvinen (2002) examines how the game uses old design solutions and mixes them innovatively to create a seemingly new experience. The game is an example of genre hybridization, for example mixing the avoidance of conflict seen in stealth games like Thief: The Dark Project (1998) with basic shooter gameplay (Järvinen, 2002).

While ideas are often recycled, this does not automatically mean that games inside a genre are identical to each other. Variation is required inside a genre, and game designers often try to revise at least some things (Arsenault, 2009, p. 165-166). While one way to approach game creation is making a clone of an earlier entry, another is to make modifications to the original game idea, building on it (Arsenault, 2009, p. 164).

Specific mechanics and design patterns are used to create specific types of experiences for the player (Arsenault, 2009, p. 171). While game features vary depending on the game, the targeted outcome is similar between games of the same genre. For example, the action-adventure genre implies fast gameplay combined with exploration. There are many ways to achieve this goal, and this leaves room for innovative design choices and creative implementation of ideas.

The lack of innovation in the games industry is often criticized, but sequels to series such as Grand Theft Auto (1997-) and FIFA (1993-) make great profits. In the business sense, innovation does not matter much. (Hadzinsky, 2014, p. 20.) Following major trends creates income for companies. Still, creative indie titles such as Minecraft and Braid (2008) are also popular, and there is demand for these kinds of games (Hadzinsky, 2014, p. 21).

Game features, the focus of this paper, are evidently not born in isolation, and completely new ones appear rarely. The absorption of ideas is what creates trends in the game industry, and innovation means creative implementation of those ideas. Trends are inherent to the industry, as using existing ideas is not necessary only financially but also creatively.

Features, which can become trends, are not necessarily genre-specific. For example, open worlds can be found in action-adventure games, simulation games and role-playing games among others. However, it is important to remember that the more similar two games are, the greater possibility there is that they share features.

Trends are usually mentioned in summaries of the game industry from the economic point of view, or in literature concerning game design. For example, Wagner (2012) talks about the trends of Facebook, web and iOS games. Morris (2020) discusses the rise of consoles, game remasters, cloud gaming and livestreaming using statistics. The trends that are often discussed are connected to gaming culture, consumer behaviour and products related to games. Compared to these, game features are rarely talked about.

Game industry trends have been researched before. Saarinen and Kultima (2009) interviewed 28 industry professionals at three game conferences. Most of the trends discussed were related to aspects outside of game design such as audience, technology and business. Trends related to games themselves were social games as well as deeper experiences, which meant AI-driven games and broader range of emotions. (Saarinen and Kultima, 2009, p. 69-81.)

There has been little to no research on modern game features in single-player video games. However, the discussion of popular game features is moderately common especially in games media, and the discussion usually centres on currently relevant features, which is the topic of this paper.

I have specifically chosen two possibly trending game features for examination. Open worlds have become increasingly common in video games, and Ubisoft, a large publisher known for many open world titles, has said in an interview it will no longer release linear games (Batchelor, 2019). RPG elements are a broader topic, as they have multiple ways they may appear in different genres of games. These elements have become a staple in many types of games during the last decade. IGN (Nix, 2018) has created a list of RPG hybrids and how the elements work in different genres. This thesis splits RPG elements

into two categories: character levelling and skill trees. Both are concrete examples of customization and progression, which are typically associated with role-playing games. They still differ from each other: character levelling means the increase of player character levels and nothing more, while skill trees usually contain concrete additions to the skillset of the character. Both are prominent features in modern games that represent role-playing elements well.

## **3 RESEARCH**

### **3.1 Research Question and Purpose of the Research**

This bachelor's thesis will answer the following research question: are open world and RPG elements trending in mainstream action-adventure games and how do they affect God of War? First, the paper attempts to prove or disprove that open worlds and RPG elements are trending game features by referencing multiple relevant video games. Then, the study examines the features as parts of God of War.

The motivation for this study and the choice of specific game features has come from personal experiences and the discussion surrounding modern games and views that the mainstream gaming landscape is homogeneous, more so than before. There has been discussion on numerous message boards, such as Reddit, ResetEra and GameFAQs, where it has been noted that a considerable portion of mainstream games are open world and have RPG elements. As there is no academic study on the trending of these features, this paper aims to look into their increasing popularity in the action-adventure genre.

Without personal knowledge the referencing of multiple games would require considerable research, which would make the topic unsuitable for a bachelor's thesis. I have played most of the games listed in this paper, and learned about their features through discussion, reviews, interviews and gameplay videos. I have played video games and followed game news and discussion almost daily for ten years, which gives me perspective to the development of features in games.

### **3.2 Research Methods**

To answer the research question, the trending status of the game features had to first be examined. This was done by examining multiple single player action-adventure non-indie video games with a metacore of 85 or higher released in 1998, 2008 and 2018 to find whether or not they contain the features. To concretize RPG elements, they were split into two categories: levelling of the player character with experience points and skill trees that allow the unlocking of abilities.

A total of 17 games were found: 7 from 1998, 6 from 2008 and 4 from 2018. When choosing the games, I made decisions to simplify the process. Reboots, remakes and

remasters were not included, and only the original release year of a game was considered. Ports were excluded: if the original release year of a game was not 1998, 2008 or 2018, a port released during a required year could not be included. If multiple versions of the game released during a required year, only the game version that had the highest metascore was considered. Some of the games were not unambiguously action-adventures, and multiple sources were needed to pinpoint their genres.

For the games I had little knowledge of, I searched for relevant information about their game features. Sources included official reviews, YouTube gameplay videos, Wikipedia and multiple discussion forums. Arguable cases required more research and the use of many sources.

I created a table to prove how common certain features are in the games that follow the criteria I have set. A graph showcases the changes of the use of game features between years. While extensive examination of each game of the chosen criteria is not possible in this thesis, some general notes are made about them to justify their use as examples of followers of trends. Observations are made after presenting the table of games and trending features.

I analytically played *God of War* to analyse the game features that were possible trends. Aarseth's (2003) methodological approach was utilized for this analysis because of its allowance of specific types of analysis depending on the need of the research. In practice, the method meant that playing was influenced by my objective: to find about the three aspects I had chosen so I could present them in depth. My viewpoint was that of an experienced action game player who had beaten *God of War* once before. Before analytical play, I had beaten *God of War* once on the Give me a Balanced Experience difficulty and completed some side quests in the postgame, totalling approximately 25 hours.

When analysing the game, I made notes regarding its design. Game mechanics and dynamics were studied. The game was played in the New Game Plus mode and in the difficulty level Give Me A Balanced Experience + so that I could gain a new perspective on the game and possibly find new angles for the study of the game's features. The mode is a continuation of player progression, as items and abilities are kept while starting the game from the beginning. New equipment and enemy attack patterns are also added. New

Game Plus was added in a patch after launch, but I deemed it necessary to make observations of it as it is a relevant part of the game.

### **3.3 God of War**

God of War is a single-player action-adventure game released exclusively for the Playstation 4. The player controls Kratos, a former Greek god who has moved to Midgard with his son Atreus. The two embark on a mission that takes them across the realms of Norse mythology, meeting many gods and legendary beings along the way. Besides the story, the game places heavy emphasis on combat but also includes puzzles and exploration.

For this paper, it is important to note the game's status as a sequel. Narratively the new God of War is a follow-up to the original trilogy on the Playstation 2 and Playstation 3 platforms. However, gameplay-wise much has been changed. During gameplay, the camera is aligned so that the player sees the game world from behind the shoulders of Kratos instead of the original far-away view. The world is no longer comprised of linear corridors, as now it is primarily open and interconnected. RPG elements have been added in the form of experience levels, stats and tiered loot.

# 4 GAME FEATURES IN ACTION-ADVENTURE GAMES

## 4.1 List of Action-adventure Games and Their Features

There are three tables and a figure that present games and whether or not they contain specific game features. Table 1 shows games from 1998, table 2 from 2008 and table 3 from 2018. At the end of each table is a total number of matches between games and features as well as their percentages. These percentages are used in figure 1, where each game feature has a section where games of different years are compared against each other. The figure's purpose is to showcase the trajectory of the features' commonness in action-adventure games.

Table 1. Games released in 1998.

Name of the Game	Open World	Player Character Levelling	Skill Tree
Banjo-Kazooie	No	No	No
Half-Life	No	No	No
Metal Gear Solid	No	No	No
Resident Evil 2	No	No	No
The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time	Yes	No	No
Thief: The Dark Project	No	No	No
Tenchu: Stealth Assassins	No	No	No
<b>Total</b>	<b>1/7 (14%)</b>	<b>0/7 (0%)</b>	<b>0/7 (0%)</b>

Table 2. Games released in 2008.



<b>Name of the Game</b>	<b>Open World</b>	<b>Player Character Levelling</b>	<b>Skill Tree</b>
Dead Space	No	No	Yes, for weapons
Far Cry 2	Yes	No	No
God of War: Chains of Olympus	No	Yes	No
Grand Theft Auto IV	Yes	No	No
Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots	No	No	No
Prince of Persia (2008)	Yes	No	No
<b>Total</b>	<b>3/6 (50%)</b>	<b>1/6 (17%)</b>	<b>1/6 (17%)</b>

Table 3. Games released in 2018.

<b>Name of the Game</b>	<b>Open World</b>	<b>Player Character Levelling</b>	<b>Skill Tree</b>
Assassin's Creed Odyssey	Yes	Yes	Yes
God of War (2018)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Marvel's Spider-Man	Yes	Yes	Yes
Red Dead Redemption 2	Yes	No	No
<b>Total</b>	<b>4/4 (100%)</b>	<b>3/4 (75%)</b>	<b>3/4 (75%)</b>

Character levelling means the increase of player level and/or attributes through collectibles, experience points or equipment. To separate this from skill trees, the increase of attributes by using a skill tree does not mean levelling up – there has to be an external mechanism of levelling.

This paper's inclusive perspective on the action-adventure genre is seen in the table: Half-Life and Far Cry 2 are first-person shooters, Metal Gear Solid, Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots, Tenchu: Stealth Assassins and Thief: The Dark Project are stealth games,

Resident Evil 2 and Dead Space are survival horror games and Banjo-Kazooie is a platformer. Stealth and survival horror games are considered subgenres of action-adventure in this study, first-person shooters with enough adventure elements can be action-adventures, and Banjo-Kazooie has a prominent game world which shifts the focus away from platforming. All of the included games encourage exploration, and navigation and inspection of the terrain is rewarded.

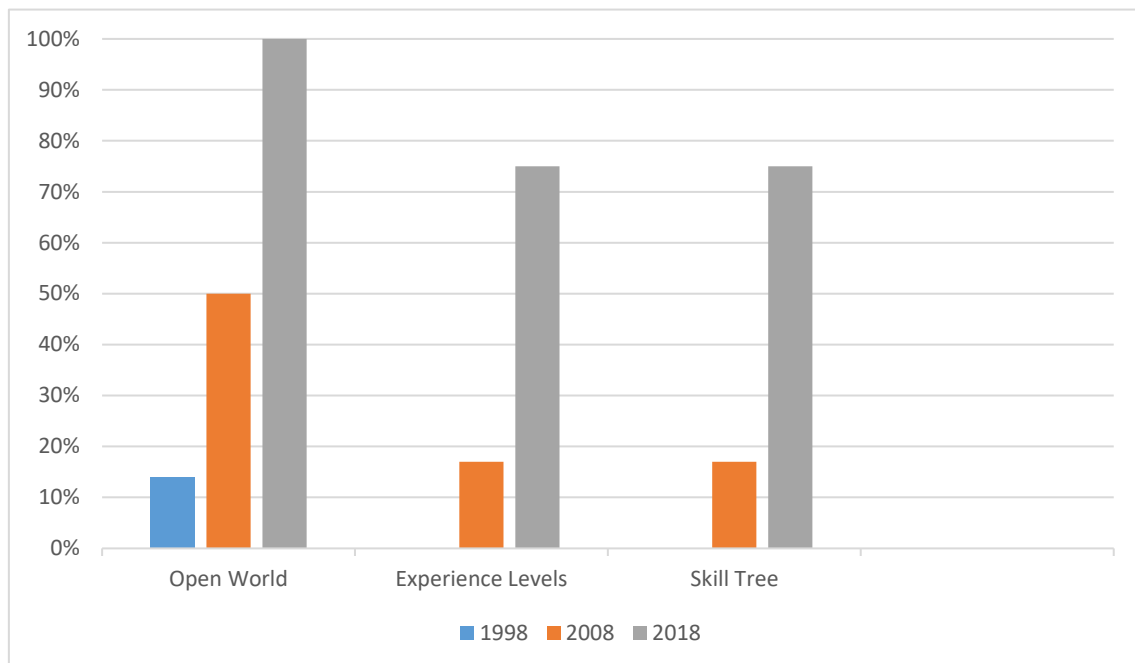


Figure 1. The appearance of trend candidates in games released in 1998, 2008 and 2018.

The results show that all of the chosen features have seen a rise in popularity, becoming more frequent in the span of 20 years.

## 4.2 Open World

The rise of open world design has influenced modern video games greatly. The greater processing power provided by new consoles and PCs has provided the necessary environment for developers to create massive 3D worlds in which load times are often non-existent. The most popular example, the Grand Theft Auto series, made its 3D debut on the Playstation 2 with Grand Theft Auto III (2001). Now, at the end of the current console generation, open world seems more popular than ever, having become a norm that even causes established linear game series to reconsider their design style. Examples of historically linear series that have recently adopted open world gameplay are the Metal Gear (1987-), Tomb Raider (1996-) and God of War (2005-) series.

The meaning of an open world is hard to define. In an article on Gamasutra, open world games are defined as “games where generally the player is left to his own devices to explore a large world” (Harris 2007). *Metroidvanias* are games where the player can go in multiple directions, but progression is locked by obstacles, limiting freedom and enforcing specific order of play. They are therefore not open world games. This paper follows Harris’ definition, but recognizes that there are multiple games that can be considered both open world and not open world. *God of War* falls in the middle of the spectrum.

In *God of War*, the game world is interconnected. The beginning of the game, which can be considered a tutorial, limits where the player can go. After this, the player has the freedom to explore most of the game world as they see fit, excluding a few story moments. The game has linear sections such as dungeons, but they are connected to the rest of the world, and the player is able to travel from one end of Midgard to the other once the game’s paths have unlocked. *God of War* is not extremely open as, for example, the *Grand Theft Auto* games, which can be credited to its mountains and other geography that limit the player’s freedom. Creative director Cory Balrog has said in an interview (Venturebeat, 2019) that *God of War* is not open world but rather “wide linear”, while many reviews disagree. Even with the occasional restrictions, the game world can be considered open because of the player’s ability to explore it freely for most of the time.

As in most open worlds, *God of War* has optional side quests and collectibles scattered around Midgard. These encourage exploration and take the player to places they would not go to if they only followed the main story. The player is rewarded with experience points, currency and items for completing these side objectives.

The game has virtually no loading screens if the player does not skip cutscenes. Everything is loaded in the background, either during cutscenes or gameplay. For example, when the player fast travels they enter a realm where they can move Kratos as usual and listen to dialogue between characters. The lack of loading screens increases the feel of wholeness in the game world.

*God of War* effectively uses its open world to enhance one of its most important elements: the bonding of Kratos and his son Atreus. Dialogue between them triggers in many optional locations, which means that exploration is rewarded not only with physical objects but also with story. There are parts where this design choice feels awkward: the

characters may have an ongoing serious argument in the main story, but when they arrive at an optional location they are suddenly friendly towards each other.



Image 1. Midgard, the primary location of the game

### 4.3 RPG Elements

RPG elements have started to appear in many genres outside of role-playing games. More often than not, modern multiplayer shooters have progression systems in the form of experience points and levels that are continuously awarded to the player. The same applies to single-player games. For action-adventure games, the sense of progression is no longer only dependant on the completion of stages and puzzles, but there are often numerical values that increase during the game. Non-numerical upgrades are also common, and making choices between these introduces customization of characters and playstyles that has originally been seen in role-playing games. Other examples of RPG elements used outside their own genre are loot systems, with different colours representing different rarities of weapons and armour, as well as dialogue choices that may or may not affect the story of the game.

Of course, not all features seen in role-playing games should be considered RPG elements. Inventory systems are typical of RPGs, but also for classic adventure games. The collection of items is also common in both role-playing and adventure games.

### **4.3.1 Experience Points and Levels**

Experience points and character levels are common in role-playing games, and they signify the increasing power of the characters in the game. Gaining levels may grant the player with increased attributes or points they can use to unlock new abilities.

In God of War, Kratos' level is tied to his weaponry, which makes weapon upgrades important. For the main weapon, the Leviathan Axe, five of six level upgrades are tied to progression of the main story. This is a design decision that keeps the focus of the game in action-adventure instead of a role-playing game. Unlike in many other games, experience points do not increase the player level. Experience points are awarded for a multitude of activities, and can be spent in the skill tree. Enemies also have levels which portray their difficulty.

By finding and equipping new pieces of armour and runes, Kratos gains power in the form of stats. These are strength, runic, defense, vitality, luck and cooldown. The increase of stats to gain power is the most apparent RPG elements in the game. The possibilities of finding new equipment are small in the early game, but after the world opens and allows exploration, equipment becomes easier to find.

By completing puzzles in the form of Nornir chests, the player can also increase Kratos' health and rage (a resource used to temporarily transform Kratos into a much stronger form) meters which are both important in combat. These are completely optional ways to strengthen the character. They are also independent from experience points.

The linear weapon progression system means that the player is quite limited when it comes to challenging foes. On the chosen difficulty level enemies with higher levels than Kratos are a tough challenge, and it is clearly encouraged to progress the main story before attempting to defeat them. The stats, runes and increased health and rage levels gained from exploration are not enough to make these encounters noticeably easier. They are still possible to win due to the traditional action game mechanics in God of War. By dodging and blocking, incoming damage can be nullified and every optional enemy is possible to defeat, even if the encounters can take a long time due to the low damage output of Kratos.

### 4.3.2 Skill Tree

Skill trees are a popular choice of customization for action-adventure games. Instead of numerical stats, skill upgrades can provide concrete changes to the gameplay in the form of new abilities or the upgrade of existing ones. They are often unlocked with currency such as experience or ability points. These can be tied to game progression or the completion of side activities and challenges.

The skill tree in God of War has upgrades for Kratos' weapons, his special Rage Mode and for Atreus who helps in combat with his bow. Experience points are awarded abundantly during the game, and gaining all the upgrades in a single playthrough is possible if the player does at least some side activities. The choices in the skill tree come from prioritization as the player probably chooses the upgrades they deem most crucial at the time. Parts of the skill tree are locked until Kratos gains weapon levels. This greatly limits the choices that the player can make in the skill tree, as parts of it are locked for most of the game.

The skills increase the depth of the game's combat, increasing the options available to Kratos. While the decision-making in the skill tree is not very meaningful due to the large amount of experience points available and the limitation of skill choices tied to progress in the main story, the slow introduction of new abilities gives the player enough time to properly learn existing skills. This creates a comfortable pacing in the game, where the player feels that they are constantly learning new things. At the end of the game, the player has learned many abilities that make the overall gameplay feel more engaging.

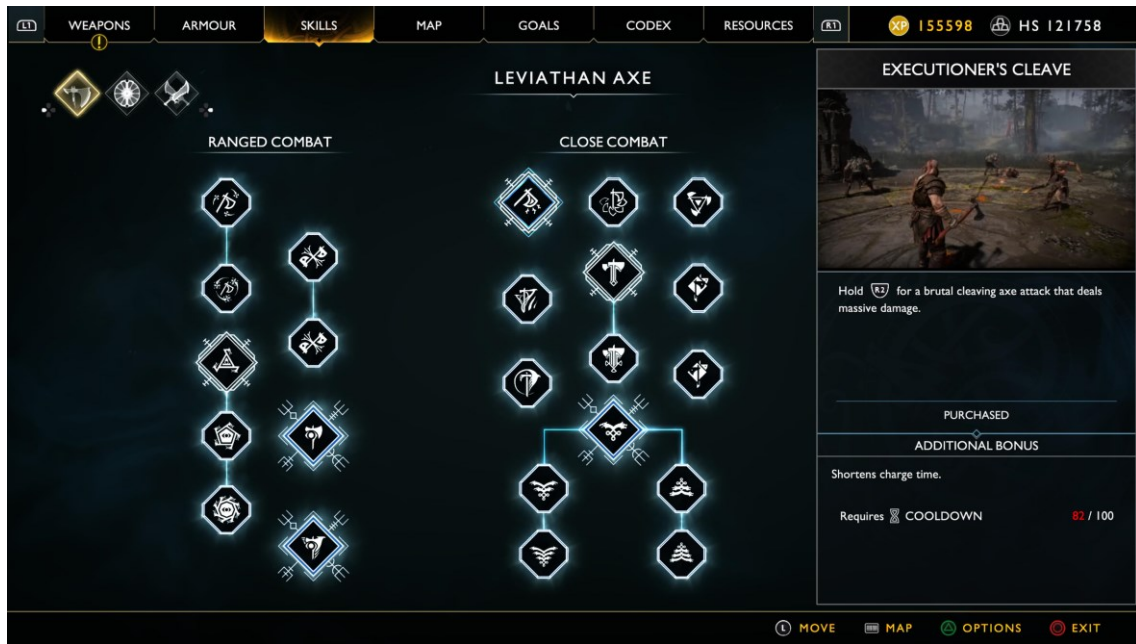


Image 2. Skill tree with upgrades to Kratos' axe.

# 5 RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

## 5.1 Results

All of the examined game features were found to be increasingly popular. Open world is now prevalent in many games, and the high percentage (100%) implies that for action-adventures, linearity has succumbed to large open worlds. The chosen RPG elements were also found to be much more popular than before.

The open world design in God of War is not as liberating as in many other games. It makes God of War feel more substantial due to the many side activities and locations the player can experience, but also causes some problems with storytelling. The game would be more focused if it was linear, but the overall experience might also become more mundane.

The RPG elements engage the player's thinking by making them compare and assess different equipment and skills. This aspect could be even more unrestricted, and there is a certain amount of control over decisions by limiting the available choices. Also, the player cannot gain substantial strength by completing side activities. The RPG elements do add depth to the game, and a completely linear progression system of abilities and attributes would lead to a duller experience.

God of War shows that using popular trends in the game does not mean that the implementation must be identical to other games. The game does not commit completely to either open world or RPG elements, only using them to enhance the game in subtle ways. God of War is not a vast sandbox with multiple ways of progression. The story is at the centre, and gameplay features are carefully attached to it.

## 5.2 Discussion

The increasing popularity of open worlds can be explained with the advancement of technology, as twenty years ago it was not at the required level to create open worlds without much difficulty. Player habits may also be a factor: those that are used to open worlds may find linear games boring due to the lack of player agency in exploration. While large worlds still require much resources to create, their increasing popularity implies that their creation is worth the investment.



The appearance of RPG elements outside role-playing games is not as easily explained. Unlike open worlds, the advancement of developer tools and platforms does not explain this. The reason could be the popularization of character and playstyle customization, which action-adventures among other games have started to adopt. Players may have gotten accustomed to choices regarding character appearances and gameplay. These features may be seen as positive aspects of games, and their absence could alienate potential buyers.

Overall, it appears that freedom of choice is appreciated and expected in many game genres, and action-adventures are an example of this. From the player perspective, there are hardly any negative factors. While the need to choose physical directions, items and skills may scare away some consumers, this is probably a minor occurrence. Open worlds and RPG elements add variation in games and increase replay value.

### **5.3 Strengths and Problems**

The choice to focus on three specific elements led to focused study which was easy to conduct. Analysis of the case game was unambiguous when describing features, and examination of player experience, while subjective, concretized the effects of the features efficiently.

The use of the word trend was problematic, as it has little academic background when used in this context. It was used to mean popular game features during a certain time frame, but using it brought problems with existing research which has mainly used it to refer to larger concepts.

Genres also caused problems due to the amount of hybrid games that include elements from many commonly recognized genres. Depending on the perspective, action RPGs could be considered action-adventure games, and God of War could be considered an action RPG in addition to action-adventure. Because of the criteria for games I presented in the table, I had to make hard decisions on which games to include and which to exclude. The inclusive perspective of the paper increased the amount of games that were examined, but despite this, the amount of games for 2018 was quite low compared to the other years. This may have had an effect on the results.

Proving that a certain feature is a trend is difficult. It is not enough that the feature is popular, but the feature's commonness should clearly be on the rise. The more abstract the feature, the harder it is to find information about it, which means that the researcher should have personally played all of the examined games recently so they could remember things clearly. As I had not played all of the listed games, I had to resort to external information which was not always undisputed.

## **5.4 Conclusions**

The examination of trends can be done in many different ways compared to the methods in this paper. While genres can be problematic, they can be used to discover the popularity of things like RPG elements. For example, comparing the amount of action RPGs released in different time frames might prove a reasonable way to approach the problem. Of course, this would have to be done systemically with clear definitions of genres and subgenres. A stricter approach to the limits of a genre may prove different results, and it would be a valuable tool for research of this kind. A large number of different games among multiple genres would also be an important factor in research.

While open worlds and RPG elements seem to be increasingly popular, it does not necessarily mean that they should be. While player freedom is important, it is also necessary for game diversity that there are linear and restricted experiences available. The consideration of player freedom occupies resources in game development even though they do not automatically lead to a better game. Development teams and publishers should carefully consider whether trending features are necessary or not.

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