

**God-Slaying: A Western and Eastern Perspective in Media**

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From ancient myths to modern video games, the act of slaying a god has captivated audiences across cultures. Yet, while both Western and Japanese media explore this theme, their interpretations differ—one emphasizing freedom, the other portraying cycles of oppression. These cultural differences are reflected in video games: while American titles like *God of War* use the god-slaying trope as a symbol of personal liberation from oppressive regimes, Japanese games like *Persona 5 Royal* and *Final Fantasy VII* employ it as a critique of societal structures, illustrating history as a repeating cycle of power and control.

First, the concept of gods in both Western and Japanese cultures will be examined to provide essential context for understanding why god-slaying has become a recurring trope and what its implications are. This foundation is crucial, as different cultural perspectives on divinity shape how they tell their stories. Next, the Western perspective will be explored through *God of War*, which reflects ideals of personal freedom and defiance, emphasizing the individual's struggle against tyranny. In contrast, the Eastern perspective, as seen in *Persona 5 Royal* and *Final Fantasy VII*, portrays god-slaying as part of a broader critique of societal structures and historical cycles. Finally, through an examination of *Hollow Knight*, the trope evolution in modern storytelling will be further explored.

### **The American Perspective**

God-slaying in Western media is relatively scarce. However, the rise and popularity of Japanese role-playing games (JRPGs) have influenced the emergence of this genre. Despite this influence, god-slaying in Western media carries a distinct meaning compared to its Japanese counterpart. At its core, the Western portrayal of god-slaying, particularly in American media, reflects a journey of personal freedom and the struggle against oppressive authority through overt storytelling and symbolism. The *God of War* series, developed in the United States, will serve as a case study.

Historically, gods in Western culture were seen as supreme authorities that had to be appeased. The Greek pantheon, for example, was perceived as omnipotent and beyond

challenge. Godhood was seen as an inherited trait rather than something attained through mighty deeds (Boehme, 2015). However, stories exist of mortals challenging gods and emerging victorious, often with divine assistance, Diomedes being one example (*Diomedes*, n.d.). This theme is echoed in the *God of War* series, where Kratos, the protagonist, initially receives his powers from Ares and is aided by Athena before ultimately overthrowing the pantheon (Santa Monica Studio, 2005–2022).

In many cases, god-slaying serves as the ultimate escalation of stakes in storytelling. A mortal overcoming an omnipotent force heightens tension and solidifies the player's or protagonist's growth. While it could be seen as a game design choice to justify a difficulty spike, the trope holds deeper significance.

Christianity, the dominant religion in Western culture, presents a stark contrast to earlier polytheistic traditions. Unlike the Greek gods, the Christian God is depicted as benevolent and paternal, sacrificing His Son for humanity's salvation (John 3:16). Salvation is granted as a gift rather than something earned through heroic deeds.

Much of the modern Western world, particularly the United States, has been shaped by the influence of Christianity. Unlike the ancient Greek gods, who demanded appeasement but remained largely detached from human struggles, Christianity emphasized a more personal and intimate relationship with God. In Christian belief, God was "in the trenches" with His followers, guiding them through hardship rather than remaining a distant figure requiring offerings.

As the United States expanded westward, settlers carried this belief with them, seeing divine providence in their journey. This idea was closely tied to Manifest Destiny, the belief that Americans were destined to spread across the continent, carrying civilization and democracy with them. Embedded within this was the Protestant ethic, which Encyclopædia Britannica (2025) defines as

The value attached to hard work, thrift, and efficiency in one's worldly calling, which, especially in the Calvinist view, were deemed signs of an individual's election, or eternal salvation. (para. 1)

Settling the frontier required resilience, reinforcing the belief that success and survival were tied to individual perseverance and moral virtue.

This environment fostered a deep cultural emphasis on rugged individualism—the idea that anyone, through sheer willpower and determination, could overcome any obstacle, including oppressive authority. This ideology gave rise to many of America's folk heroes, such as John Henry and Davy Crockett, figures who triumphed against adversity and became symbols of American exceptionalism. The revolutionary ethos, rooted in the nation's founding, further reinforced this narrative, celebrating the individual's struggle for autonomy against tyranny.

However, this national identity contains a paradox—America sees itself as both a divinely chosen nation and a perpetual underdog. From its revolutionary origins to its expansionist policies, the United States has positioned itself as a force of destiny while simultaneously portraying itself as fighting against oppression. This contradiction not only shapes American narratives, where protagonists are both chosen warriors and outsiders resisting corrupt systems, but also moralizes rebellion. If the American ethos is built on the idea that freedom must be fought for, then overthrowing oppressive rulers, including gods, is not just a personal struggle—it is a righteous one. In this framework, god-slaying becomes an inherently moral act, symbolizing the triumph of liberty over tyranny.

This is evident in *God of War*, where Kratos' slaughter of the Olympian gods is framed as a necessary act of justice. The Greek gods are cruel and manipulative, and their destruction is not portrayed as tragic but *rightful*. Kratos, despite being a former servant of the gods himself, embodies the revolutionary underdog, echoing America's own self-image. His battle is not just about revenge—it is about breaking free from an oppressive divine system, much like the American Revolution sought to overthrow British rule.

Western god-slaying narratives reflect a journey from oppression to freedom. They emphasize personal growth, self-determination, and defiance against unjust authority. This is exemplified in *God of War* (2018) when Kratos retrieves his Blades of Chaos. Confronted by Athena, he defiantly declares, "I am your pawn no longer" (Santa Monica Studio, 2005–

2022). This moment encapsulates the core message of Western god-slaying: breaking free from external control and embracing one's own agency as a moral act.

### **The Japanese Perspective**

The Japanese cycle of history is one of false gods—powerful figures and institutions that promise a utopia, only to be replaced by another in an endless cycle of upheaval. This history shapes modern Japanese perspectives, where god-slaying in media represents resistance against oppressive structures that fail to deliver on their promises. *Persona 5 Royal* and *Final Fantasy 7* will serve as a case study.

Before discussing god-slaying, there needs to be a framework established. Kami, Japanese gods, are not omnipotent rulers but rather natural forces. As Inoue Nobutaka explains, “Celestial bodies, for example, the sun, the moon, and the stars, were often worshiped as the kami itself” (para. 6). Even institutions and ideologies can be seen as kami if they exert enough influence, as seen with the Shogun in ancient times and bushido. Godhood then is not determined by divine birth but by the power and influence one exerts over the world. This is why some emperors of Japan, such as Nobunaga and Meiji, are revered as kami—they attained godhood through their deeds.

Throughout history, Japan has continually replaced old gods with new ruling forces. Buddhism was supplanted by the shogunate. In the post-World War II era, bushido gave way to capitalism and corporate control. These forces, now dominant in Japanese society, are often portrayed as 'gods' in modern media.

In *Persona 5 Royal*, the Phantom Thieves explore palaces—manifestations of distorted desires. One such place is Mementos which represents the collective unconscious of the Japanese public. At its core lies the Holy Grail, a Western symbol of prosperity, which in truth is a deceptive force maintaining societal control. Upon its defeat, it transforms into Yaldabaoth, the God of Control, who enforces a world where the public no longer thinks for itself, existing only to work (P-Studio, 2019). The metaphor is clear: Yaldabaoth embodies capitalism's false promise of prosperity in exchange for conformity.

The battle against Yaldabaoth is not merely about defeating a deity but about rejecting a system that enforces passive obedience.

In Final Fantasy VII, three main antagonists represent different forms of power: Shinra, Jenova, and Sephiroth. The Shinra Electric Power Company, the most powerful corporation in the game's world, seeks the "Promised Land," a supposed paradise rich in energy. This pursuit reflects real-world corporate expansion and exploitation, mirroring Japan's rapid industrialization and economic dominance post-WWII.

Jenova, an alien mistaken for a divine Ancient, is captured and used for experimentation by Shinra. However, rather than being a guiding force, Jenova is revealed to be a parasitic entity seeking to consume and dominate the world. This reflects how ruling powers throughout history have misinterpreted or co-opted religious and ideological symbols to serve their own ambitions.

Then comes Sephiroth, the ultimate creation of Shinra's experiments and the counterpart to the protagonist, Cloud. As Moon Channel describes him, Sephiroth is "an entity that marries native problems with foreign ideology; the product of a conglomerate's hunger for power and the poison of an alien being infecting the world around it. Sephiroth is a metaphor for government" (Channel, M., 2024). In this cycle of false gods, Jenova represents the old god, supplanted by Shinra, the false god, who is then overthrown by Sephiroth, the new god. This is the shared cultural experience of the Japanese people: an old god is uprooted by a new, more powerful institution or entity claiming to know the way to the promised land. It asserts its will on the people, exploiting anything it can. But the promised land never comes, and the cycle repeats.

In Persona 5 Royal and Final Fantasy VII, god-slaying is not only an act of rebellion against an oppressive system. It serves as an acknowledgment and cry for help, highlighting how the system is inherently stacked against the common person and how the cycle of oppression will inevitably continue. Unlike the Western perspective, where slaying the god restores order and resolves the conflict, Japanese narratives tend to embrace ambiguity. The cycle of false gods persists, demanding constant resistance. True freedom

is not achieved through a single act of defiance but through an ongoing struggle against oppression.

### Conclusion

God-slaying in Western and Japanese media serves as a powerful narrative tool, but the meanings behind it differ significantly. Western games like *God of War* depict it as a journey of personal freedom and defiance. Japanese games like *Persona 5 Royal* and *Final Fantasy VII* present it as part of an ongoing cycle of oppression and societal control. These perspectives have influenced each other over the years. *Hollow Knight* is a perfect western example of this.

While *God of War* embodies the Western tradition of god-slaying as a means of breaking free from oppressive rule, *Hollow Knight* complicates this narrative. Developed by the Australian studio Team Cherry, *Hollow Knight* is an example of how Japanese storytelling conventions have influenced Western game design, particularly in its handling of godhood and cycles of power.

In *Hollow Knight*, the protagonist, the Knight, embarks on a journey to overthrow powerful, god-like beings—the Pale King, the Radiance, and various "higher beings" that shaped Hallownest's fate. However, unlike Kratos' triumph over the Olympian gods, the Knight's victories do not lead to a restored order or personal liberation. Instead, each ending suggests that God-slaying only perpetuates an endless cycle. Even in the "best" ending, the Knight is replaced rather than truly freed, reinforcing a theme more common in Japanese narratives: the illusion of finality (Team Cherry. 2017).

This departure from the Western ideal of absolute victory mirrors the themes found in Japanese god-slaying narratives, where false gods continuously rise and fall, trapping the world in a repeating cycle. *Hollow Knight* shares narrative DNA with games like *Persona 5 Royal* and *Final Fantasy VII*, in which toppling a god does not mean an end to oppression—only another shift in power.

However, just as Western games have adopted elements of Japanese storytelling, Japanese media has also absorbed Western themes of individualism and personal liberation. *Persona 5 Royal*, while rooted in Japan's historical distrust of authority, also embraces the Western ideal of self-discovery, specifically that rebellion is moral, to enact societal change. The Phantom Thieves' journey to challenge corrupt figures and ultimately overthrow Yaldabaoth is not just about resisting a cycle of false gods—it is also about reclaiming personal agency. Rebellion and personal freedom is a core theme throughout the game (P-Studio, 2019).

Understanding the significance of these narratives goes beyond gaming. Video games are a form of storytelling that, like literature and film, reflect the cultures that create them. As gaming continues to grow in influence, it shapes and redefines the way players think about power, oppression, and rebellion. These are universal themes—felt and experienced across cultures, whether in the West or the East. The god-slaying trope is more than just a dramatic storytelling device; it is a lens through which gamers and non-gamers can examine how societies wrestle with authority and transformation. Whether framed as an act of ultimate defiance or as part of a never-ending struggle, these stories speak to something deeply human, which is why they continue to resonate worldwide. Whether framed as an act of defiance or as part of a never-ending struggle, these stories speak to something deeply human and continue to resonate worldwide.

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