

## Postmortem - Sony Santa Monica's *God of War: Ascension*

By Whitney Wade, Chacko Sonny

*In this postmortem from the final issue of [Game Developer magazine](#), Sony Santa Monica senior producer Whitney Wade and director of internal development Chacko Sonny discuss bringing multiplayer to the God of War experience. (The complete issue is [available as a free download here](#).)*

*God of War: Ascension* is the fourth mainline installment in the award-winning *God of War* series. Development started almost immediately after the completion of *God of War III*, and we set out to exceed the achievements of the prior game -- deliver something bigger, better, and more awe-inspiring while adding something new to the franchise. Ultimately, the product succeeded on many fronts, establishing a strong multiplayer game within the franchise, but fell slightly short of the near-universal critical acclaim for *God of War III*.

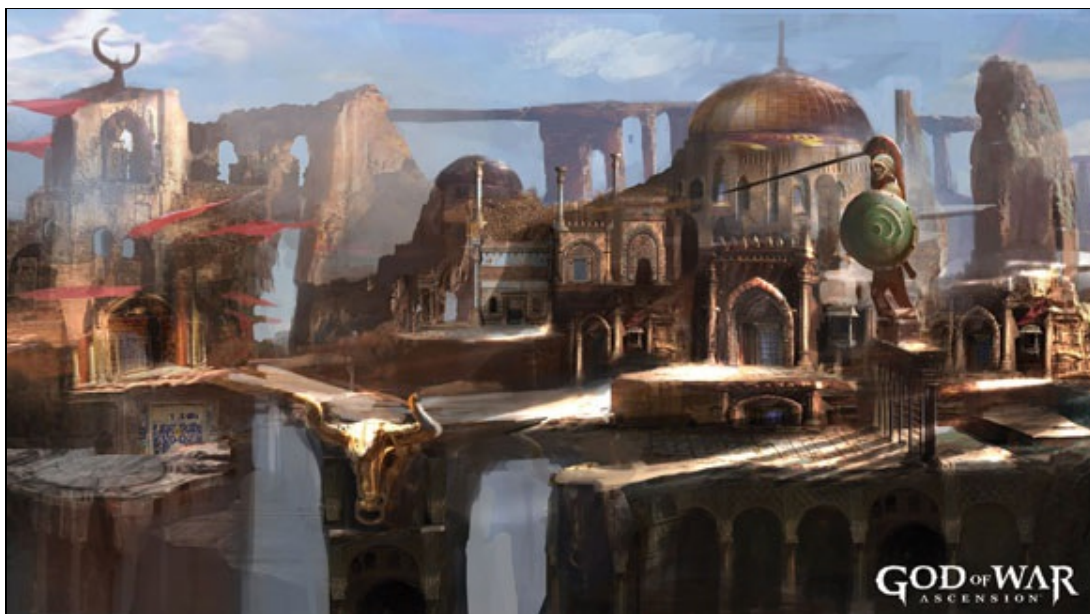
Over the course of development, we faced a number of unique challenges, but we managed to take advantage of the Santa Monica Studios team's key strengths to complete the project on time, within budget, and to our quality standards. This postmortem reflects some of the things that went right, some of the things that went wrong, and the key lessons we learned over the course of building this game.



## What Went Right

### 1. Multiplayer Brought New Life to the Franchise

The decision to add multiplayer to the traditionally single-player *God of War* was controversial from the start, both with fans and team members. This departure from our core expertise forced us to reconsider how we made games, and in some ways, it enabled us to return to the principles that helped create the original *God of War*: extensive playtesting, brutal feedback, constant iteration. This invigorated our technical and creative forces. The MP team rekindled our "underdog" spirit -- we needed to prove to critics, players, and ourselves that we could deliver the entirety of the *God of War* experience in multiplayer. In light of the recent spate of "tacked on" (critics' words, not ours) MP additions to other games, this was an extremely difficult task, as many dismissed the MP game outright before even trying it. People on the team have never been more passionate about proving something, and after our MP Beta, we had converted legions of fans who had either been on the fence or outright opposed to it into our strongest advocates.



### 2. New Hires Brought New Life to the Team

In the past, Sony Santa Monica has grown from within; many of our senior leaders are team members who have been here from the very beginning of the team. Over time, a number of team members who have left briefly for stints elsewhere in the industry have returned to SMS,

acknowledging that there is something unique about the team, process, and products we create.

For *Ascension*, however, the scope of the game and the complexity of the entire project required that we grow the team dramatically. We acknowledged early on that we required a variety of new skills (multiplayer engineering and design, for example), and leadership expertise in order to successfully deliver the project we had defined. Through an aggressive hiring push, working in conjunction with on-site talent acquisition staff who helped execute our rigorous interview process, we were able to find key contributors in all disciplines and at all levels of seniority.

Our newer team members bring with them a fresh outlook and offer experience or ideas on how we can improve things. This new life is something that we don't take for granted, and we had to work hard to make sure that all team members still felt like they could bring their contributions to the table, even as we grew. This is something that went very right on this project -- careful hiring pays off in the long term, and has led to one of the strongest Santa Monica Studio internal dev teams yet.

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### **3. Franchise Strengths Provided a Solid Foundation for Innovation and Quality**

*Ascension's* visual and gameplay spectacles, like the Hecatonchires at the beginning of the game, and the Fury Monster at the end of the game, would not exist without sequences from prior games like *Cronos*, *Gaia*, or *Poseidon*. For the Hecatonchires sequence, the team sought to exceed the complexity of the introductory sequence from *God of War III*, which was a massive challenge. By building on the strengths of the prior games and leveraging the team's knowledge of how to create these sequences, we were able to focus on continually pushing the quality bar.

Critics have universally hailed the visuals in the game as the peak of the PS3 generation. Further, the gameplay innovations that were added - including new navigation mechanics, or the blade magics, for example --were the direct result of a desire to improve on systems from prior games.

### **4. Strong Marketing and PR Partnerships Led to Global Strategy and Execution**

For this project, we had outstanding relationships with marketing and PR that started early and stayed consistent through the entire project. The teams were raring to go with ideas on how to push the boundaries of what we'd done before, but they also respected the amount of work we had on our plates to make a game that would live up to what we set out to accomplish. We revamped our visual campaign to tie into the key game art motif, but we also looked to completely rework [godofwar.com](http://godofwar.com), and make sure that our website became a destination for information and interaction more than it had ever been before.

While supporting these things took time from our senior leads, we worked together early on to define an overall plan that we wanted to support, instead of feeling like we were flying by the seat of our pants to support last-minute requests. Last-minute requests are normal for a lot of the marketing and PR process, of course, but we were able to reduce them by having a plan and communicating it outward to all territories, and getting global buy-in and team support. Having a clear master plan, as aggressive as ours was, went smoother than on any other project. Our marketing and PR teams are clear partners in the success of our project, having taken great care in supporting the franchise and the development team.

### **5. Early MP Testing Forced Us to Think of the Game as an Evolving Service**

Multiplayer beta testing provided a chance to validate that the system and game design for the MP game would hold up to the scrutiny of a dedicated fanbase, and to the volume of players we'd see once the game launched. Since multiplayer was new to most of us, we wanted to make sure that we were buttoned up in the wild before launching. While we have certainly discovered a few issues post-launch, they have been manageable, and people can still play while we address them.

We released our game in March 2013, but we started beta testing in fall 2012. The beta testing proceeded as expected, revealing successive layers of issues that we would address, deploy fixes for, and then monitor in a live environment. The most important change from this testing was not the improvement to the software, but a fundamental change in how we planned for supporting the game once it went live. We had designed the team's workflow to enable them to quickly iterate on fixes, deploy them through infrastructure (testing, certification, patching), and coordinate with internal technology partners within Sony. We also developed the right systems to monitor, log, and interpret any changes we implemented. Also, the live testing environment gave us insight into how we should prioritize for key features, and drove our development tasking as we closed in on release.

### **6. Cross-Functional Leadership Allowed Us to "Finish Strong"**

By the end of the game, we needed to focus and get it all done. There was still a lot of work to be done, and we needed to change up how we had approached completion on prior games. In the past we had created small pods to work on very specific areas of the game, like *Cronos*, for example.

We determined that each level needed key design and art leads to gather the massive volume of fixes completed in a day and make sure the levels stayed functional as we were putting the finishing touches in. The builds were locked at that point, as well, so we needed to make sure that not only the levels themselves stayed stable, but that the game as a whole didn't break. For example, we had a key artist and a key designer gather changes on behalf of the respective teams. This included lighting for art and cameras for design. Art would gather and

playtest the entire level by lunch, and then design would gather and playtest by dinner.

At the end of the day, we had a completed level with that day's fixes. Not only did this help keep everything together and running, but it also helped with communication in the respective disciplines, as well as between art and design. It also created individual ownership, as well as responsibility to not let down others who were working in the same areas. This was one of those things that I slapped my forehead over and wished we'd put into place way earlier on the project.

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## What Went Wrong

### 1. Shortened Pre-Production Due to Schedule Limitations

As one project ends, it's important to begin planning for the next. We hold to a very high standard during our finalizing process, and the reality is that *God of War* takes all focus and all hands on deck to finish. Everything is custom, and every part requires a level of pride and perfection that only we put on ourselves, and it all comes together in the end.

Balancing that kind of singular focus against pre-production for the next project was a very big challenge. At the end of *God of War III*, we were also doing some R&D experiments with an entirely new project. Our excitement ultimately came back around to telling a new *God of War* story, but that conclusion came later than we would have liked, and we lost out on invaluable pre-production time. Between "all hands on deck" to finish the previous game, and experiments with new directions we didn't take, pre-production for *Ascension* was not in the place where Todd Papy (game director) and senior leadership wanted it to be when we began. This proved to be very difficult to recover from, and it did have a detrimental impact on the entirety of the project.

### 2. Technical Debt Delayed Delivery of Key Mechanics

While many of the systems that were improved for *God of War: Ascension* built upon successful systems from prior games, some features, not least of which was multiplayer, required substantial rewrites that took longer than expected, and we couldn't deliver those mechanics until well after key deadlines. Our entire player navigation code was something that we had to completely change to allow for online play, which was initially assumed to be co-op and therefore had to work alongside the single-player campaign. That was a much bigger undertaking, and it didn't go as smoothly as we had hoped, so we lost a lot of mechanic development time in that effort. Ultimately, the single-player and multiplayer parts of the game were more delineated than was initially expected, and a less disruptive approach would, in hindsight, have been better.

While the wall-navigation system was ultimately smoother than in prior games, revising this system required additional effort from animation, environment art, design, and engineering, and by the time the system was fully implemented, we didn't have enough time to polish it sufficiently. In the end, we learned the hard way that we should have put more time into these elements up front, and better understood the scope and effort needed to finish them.



### 3. The Road to Multiplayer Was Longer than Expected

We knew that we wanted to tackle multiplayer, but we didn't know what that meant in terms of creative and technical resources. We had never attempted multiplayer, and we didn't have a lot of team members who had that experience, so we created our own rules -- some of which were successful, and many of which would have been identified as unsuccessful, earlier, if this had been an established multiplayer

gameplay genre.

When we started thinking about multiplayer, we left the constraints wide open. We knew that we wanted to do more than tack on a bunch of playable Kratos characters in a competitive arena. We knew we wanted to do more than add a co-op bot, and most of all, we knew that whatever we did had to be awesome and *God of War* in its epicness. What we didn't know was that every idea would feel too small upon the start. What we didn't know was how much work it would take to make the game we envisioned, and how many people would be required to successfully realize that vision. On top of that, we all didn't agree on what the game should be.

So we ventured on and did a lot of prototyping. We started down a co-op path and realized that it just wasn't going to be what we wanted. It wasn't until just before our first showing to the press and public that we really found the heart of what would become our final multiplayer game, and we tweaked it right up until Alpha. In the end, however, we're really happy with what we shipped, and we continue to hone the experience through patches and DLC.

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#### 4. Shared Leadership for Single and Multiplayer Teams Slowed Progress

As anyone who's built one knows, building a multiplayer game along with single-player is like making two separate games. The amount of attention required for mode-specific issues requires dedicated leadership for each game type. While we had the majority of the team fully dedicated to either multiplayer or single-player, some key leaders, including Todd and Chacko, were split between single-player and multiplayer.

As we were getting ready for our big press announce, which exclusively featured a multiplayer reveal, our entire focus was on getting multiplayer ready for that. During that time, the single-player game got very little senior leadership attention. By the time we refocused onto single-player and toward our big single-player E3 debut, we ended up playing catch up, and then multiplayer suffered.

We juggled this way through the entire project, which also resulted in slower decision-making than desired on most everything. Luckily, our team was able to keep the various balls rolling, but we can imagine it was very frustrating for them to have that pressure and lack of leadership from the lead producer and game director.

#### 5. Struggling to Balance Story and the Series Tradition of "Epic Moments"

We really wanted to change the way we told the story, and try to go deeper emotionally with Kratos's storyline, giving the players more context and emotional substance to experience. We had a lot of initial ideas and even prototyped visual cues that we played with at the start of the game. We felt good about the direction. The story and script as a whole met that criteria, too.

Finding the right balance of story and the series' staple "Epic Moments" provided an unexpectedly complex challenge. As important as it was for us that we find new ways to tell the story -- and the kind of story we were trying to tell -- it was always critical that we also find ways to top the jaw-dropping setpieces of previous games. As we closed in on finishing the game, we decided to retain our primary focus on the game's biggest moments -- those "epic" moments and setpieces. Unfortunately, this came at the cost of narrowing our story-telling vision. We're proud of so many moments in *Ascension*, but the finished game did miss many of the storytelling ambitions we had hoped to deliver to both ourselves and our audience.

## Conclusion

In the end, *God of War: Ascension* became a strong addition to the series, a chance for Santa Monica Studio to grow (both as individual devs and collectively as a team, in terms of their multiplayer experience), and also opened new doors for the franchise with a vibrant, active multiplayer community.

Our key takeaways over the course of the project were a better functional understanding of our deeply integrated production process, and the true scope of a dedicated multiplayer experience from concept to online implementation. All in all, *Ascension* required a tremendous amount of coordination and communication between team members in different disciplines. Ultimately, we found the solution to our challenges lies with better, more robust planning and prioritization up front. The team and the senior leadership learned a great deal on *Ascension*, and even now we're incorporating the key lessons into our process on our new projects.

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