God of War III packs all the punch of its predecessors while bringing the experience to a whole new level. The simple yet deep combat system is amplified by superior graphics and the final chapter in the tale of Kratos, a warrior whose loyalty to the gods of Mount Olympus brought him nothing but suffering.

As *God of War II* ended, Kratos -- allied with the Titans -- stood poised to make a grand assault on Mount Olympus. It's at this moment that *God of War III* -- a PlayStation 3 exclusive released last month -- begins, and the war between the gods and Titans is rekindled.

Gameplay remains largely unchanged. You still swing your swords at multiple enemies as they rush at you, with few additions outside of new weapons and more enemies on the screen simultaneously. You still have light and heavy strikes, can block and dodge attacks, and can grab your enemies and jump.

The quick-time events (requiring you to react to on-screen prompts) received the most noticeable improvement, with the input indicators on the edges of the screen in a way that doesn't obstruct the action but clearly indicates through positioning which button you're supposed to push.

What's important to remember, though, is that the combat system hit the nail on the head in the series' first installment -- challenging but intuitive -- and there was never much to fix.

The presentation has been taken to such new heights that it's staggering to realize that *God of War III* r
uns on only the gameplay engine, with no cinematic cutscenes. The scenery -- the majestic

palaces of the gods, the souls floating on the River Styx -- is impressive enough, but it's the Titan interaction that leaves your jaw on the floor. These beings are more than 300 stories tall, and they act as a living background on which you fight, with camera angles cleverly showing where on these giants you're battling. There aren't many of these Titan combat moments, but they're stunning.

Taking a page out of *Uncharted 2's* book of small touches with big effects, blood will splatter onto Kratos based on how he fights, wounds to an enemy will remain visible until the opponent turns to dust, and the organs of some enemies are spilled on the ground. It's the evolution of the brutal beauty the series became known for.

Opening with a full-scale war between the gods and the Titans, the game amazingly does nothing but continually one-up itself. Whether it's a new twist on the action (watching through Poseidon's eyes as Kratos pummels him, as the controller mimics his pulse until that final spine-chilling strike stops it cold) or a duel of epic proportions (Kratos versus Hercules, who is voiced by Kevin Sorbo -- which I find both funny and cool), every event pumps up the adrenaline and leads naturally through the story.

The only disappointment is that it can be completed in a relatively short eight to 10 hours on hard difficulty. But the game is concentrated enjoyment, so its brevity is easily forgiven. If you're the kind of person who loves action movies such as *Gladiator* and the first 20 minutes of *God of War III* don't leave you hungry for more, something's wrong with you.

God of War III is the best action game I have ever played, surpassing personal favorites such as the *Devil May Cry* and *Castlevania* series. It hits all the right notes for me with combat and story, not to mention how pretty it all looks in action. It saddens me that the story ends here, but it's a trilogy so good that it's worth playing through all its games over again.

God of War III *is now available on PlayStation 3 for $59.95. For this review, the author completed the story on Titan difficulty.*

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